

PLAYS

BY

W. S. MAUGHAM

By W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

LIZA OF LAMBETH
MRS. CRADDOCK
THE MERRY-GO-ROUND
THE EXPLORER
THE MAGICIAN
THE MOON & SIXPENCE
OF HUMAN BONDAGE
THE TREMBLING OF A LEAF
ON A CHINESE SCREEN
THE PAINTED VEIL
THE CASUARINA TREE
ASHENDEN
THE GENTLEMAN IN THE PARLOUR
CAKES AND ALE
OR, THE SKELETON IN THE CUPBOARD
FIRST PERSON SINGULAR

Plays

JACK STRAW
LADY FREDERICK
THE EXPLORER
MRS. DOT
PENELOPE
THE TENTH MAN
SMITH
LANDED GENTRY
A MAN OF HONOUR
THE UNKNOWN
THE CIRCLE
CÆSAR'S WIFE
EAST OF SUEZ
THE LAND OF PROMISE
OUR BETTERS
THE UNATTAINABLE
HOME AND BEAUTY
LOAVES AND FISHES
THE LETTER
THE CONSTANT WIFE
THE SACRED FLAME
THE BREADWINNER

WILLIAM HEINEMANN LTD.

PLAYS

by

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

VOLUME III.

OUR BETTERS
THE UNATTAINABLE
HOME AND BEAUTY



LONDON

WILLIAM HEINEMANN LTD

**THREE PLAYS IN ONE VOL
FIRST PUBLISHED 1932**

**PRINTED
IN GREAT BRITAIN
AT THE WINDMILL PRESS**

PREFACE

THE plays in this volume are placed in the order in which they were written. *Our Betters*, though it was not acted in London till 1923, and then only with a scene at the end of the second act altered to suit the exigencies of the Lord Chamberlain, was written in Rome at the beginning of 1915. When at last it was produced I extracted a certain amount of discreet amusement from such of the critics as found in it a development of characteristics that they had discovered in plays produced before but written much later. I may add in passing that in this edition I have reverted to my original version. It was more probable and I do not see that it was more shocking. In the few years that have passed audiences have become used to greater frankness, and if the play were ever revived I have little doubt that the word *slut* used by one of the characters, which made the spectators on the first night gasp with horror, would now fail entirely to express the speaker's indignation. *The Unattainable* was produced under the name of *Caroline*, and it gave Miss Irene Vanbrugh the opportunity for one of the best performances of her distinguished career. I had a somewhat unusual experience with this play. I wrote it in Geneva during the autumn of 1915. I was engaged in work for the Intelligence Department which the Swiss authorities did not approve of, and my predecessor had had a nervous breakdown owing to the strain it put upon his temperament, more sensitive than mine, to break the law; my colleague at Lausanne had lately been sent to prison for two years. I did not know how political prisoners were treated and I had no notion whether, should such an unpleasant fate befall me, I should be allowed pens and paper. I hated the idea of leaving the play unfinished, and I knew it would be very difficult to take it up again after a long interval. It was a great relief

to me when I wrote the last line. I sent it to London, and it was put into rehearsal at once. I had written the whole play up to a great comic scene in the last act, a scene of mistaken identity in the classic manner, which in imagination had very much amused me; and, indeed, it was on my exuberant description of this scene that Miss Vanbrugh had accepted the play. I managed to get a few days' leave and went to London for the final rehearsals. The date was fixed for production. Things were very well advanced. The caste was word-perfect. I sat through the first two acts and was not dissatisfied; the play seemed to have come through very much as I had seen it in my mind's eye, but I was awaiting the scene which I expected to prove the climax of the comedy. A very good actor, George Tully, had been engaged to play in it. The persons concerned started. They went through it and they acted it very well. To my dismay I discovered that it did not amuse me at all. Here was a pretty kettle of fish! It took up two-thirds of the last act, and it was to lead up to it that the first two acts had been devised. It seemed to me that there was but one thing to do. I waited till the rehearsal was finished and then, telling Dion Boucicault, who was producing it, that this would not do at all, asked him to give me twenty-four hours, took the script home and rewrote the last act. I left out the scene that had so much disappointed me, and with it the character that George Tully was to act. The play now offered to the reader is the result. I do not know that it is an author's business to point out to his readers the defects of his work, but if I were a critic I should perhaps feel it my duty to make the observation that the play really is finished by the end of the first act. What follows might have very well been left to the imagination of the audience.

The same stern critic might make the same objection to *Home and Beauty*, the last play in this volume, and in each case the answer might be given, in extenuation, that a certain number of diverting scenes do what is possible to atone for the failure to adhere to the strict canons of drama.

Home and Beauty was written in a sanatorium during the last winter of the war. I had escaped a Swiss prison, but the work I was engaged in had much exposed me to the rigours of a singularly bad winter and I had contracted tuberculosis of the lungs. This had been aggravated by a sojourn in Russia, and when on the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks I was obliged to come back to England, I was feeling very sorry for myself. It was impossible then to go to Davos or St. Moritz, so I went to Scotland. It was a very pleasant life at Nordrach-on-Dee. I was sent to bed every day at six o'clock, and an early dinner gave me a long evening to myself. The cold, windless night entered the room through the wide-open windows, and with mittens on my hands so that I could comfortably hold a pen, it was an admirable opportunity to write a farce. For *Home and Beauty* pretends to be no more. I never had an opportunity of seeing it, but I believe it made people laugh very much. Some of the critics called it cruel and heartless. I should not have thought it was. It was written in the highest possible spirits. It was intended to amuse.

So, for the matter of that, were the other two plays in this volume. The reader of the previous prefaces to this edition of my plays will not be surprised at my confession that I think this is the business of a comedy. To my mind it is not a work of edification, though it should be a work of art, and if it castigates the follies of the moment that is by the way and only so far as this no doubt laudable process occasions laughter. The object is the entertainment of the audience, not their improvement.

I am conscious that my plays are classed by the learned who write books on the drama and contribute articles to encyclopædias as commercial theatre, and it is true that on the whole the managers have made money out of them and I have kept the wolf some distance from my door.

The difficulty of the drama as an art lies for the most part in its dependence on the audience. An audience is a crowd and art as we know has nothing to do with the multitude.

The working classes, absorbed in the daily effort of providing for the needs of the body, have little energy left over to cultivate the disinterested emotions of art. The upper classes know nothing of it and care less. They feign sometimes an interest in it when fashion suggests such a pose as a social distinction. Great ladies then cultivate those occupied with the arts as in former times they kept buffoons. An interest in art is found, if in any class at all, most commonly perhaps in the middle ranks of society. A German observer of this country has stated that it is almost exclusively confined to the northern and western suburbs of London. Even here it must be rare, for it needs not only a natural instinct, which is uncommon, but an elaborate cultivation. That the two are necessary is shown by the fact that a true feeling for one of the arts by no means entails feeling for the others: a man may have admirable taste in pictures and none at all in literature or music. The appeal of the arts then is to the very few.

But the drama cannot do with that. It must address itself equally to the working man in the gallery and to the gilded youth in the stalls. It must interest the stock-jobber who reads nothing but *The Financial Times* and the elderly spinster whose soul is sweet with memories of Italy and Greece. Attempts have been made from time to time to separate the various classes of playgoers. It has been suggested that certain plays should be written with the idea of attracting a limited, intellectual section, rather than the public at large; but the attempts have failed, as indeed an elementary acquaintance with the philosophy of the subject would have shown was inevitable; and the difficulty still remains to move, amuse and entertain an audience composed of persons with every variety of education and intelligence. It would be impossible if the audience consisted simply of the aggregation of individuals, but the play forms it into a distinct organism with characteristics peculiar to itself. It seems obvious that the audience is as much part of the play as the words and their interpreters. I read once a French

criticism in which the theory was advanced that the reading of a play was the only test of its merit: on the stage one was influenced by the skill of the actors, the elaborateness of the setting and the emotions of one's fellow spectators. I think this is nonsense. The play that is read differs not at all from that monstrous product, once fashionable, the novel in dialogue. A play exists without an audience as little as a colour without a spectator. If plays have maintained through the many centuries since the drama arose "in a rude and unpremeditated manner" from the worship of Dionysus, certain main traits, it is due not to the imitativeness of the dramatists, but to the unaltered characteristics of the crowd. I do not know if the psychology of the audience is capable of change, but it is clear from the most casual study of dramatic works since Æschylus that no great change has taken place in it hitherto.

The audience has a collective soul. It feels, reacts, and thinks differently from what each member of it, taken separately, would do. It is emotional rather than intellectual, and this gives it homogeneity; for however unlike men are by their intelligence, their passions are the same. The audience is on a lower level of civilisation than the persons of which it is composed, and it may be for this reason that the theatre is a generation behind the culture of the age. The opinions, ideas and beliefs which are suggested to an audience are accepted or rejected in the mass, uncritically, and are considered either as absolute truths or as absolute errors. An audience can only receive ideas when they are placed before it in their simplest form, and even then only when they agree with its own instinctive convictions.

An audience demands sympathy, which I take to be no more than direction of interest; for it is well-known that a sympathetic character need not be a virtuous one. It has a moral code which, according to the time, may be stricter or more lax than that of the individual. At the present moment, in England at all events, it is shocked by things that would

not shock the individual, though under the reign of Charles II, when probably the general morality was little different from what it is now, it accepted conduct which would have outraged him. It is emotional, but at the same time has more commonsense than the individual. It has its own theories of life which do not always coincide with life as known by the individual. *Though swayed by impulse it does not believe in it on the stage.* The individual can hardly have failed to notice that the actions of men are much influenced by their passions, but an audience insists that they shall be influenced only by reason. It demands much stronger motives than are demanded in real life. For example, it so often happens that men throw themselves into the water to save a perfect stranger from drowning that the newspapers seldom trouble to announce the fact; but on the stage if you made someone do anything of the kind the spectators would shrug their shoulders and say: these things don't happen. You could only make the occurrence probable by giving at least three overwhelming personal reasons for such a piece of foolhardiness. An audience has also racial characteristics. The English are not a sexual nation and you cannot easily persuade them that a man will sacrifice anything important for love. I do not think an English audience, notwithstanding the prestige of Shakespeare, ever really accepts the story of Antony and Cleopatra as credible. It is this difference of attitude towards sexual passion that makes foreign plays so improbable to us.

It is clear that the dramatist's concern is with the audience as an organic whole and not with the persons who make it up. As soon as they leave the theatre and go about their separate affairs they cease to be an audience and he has no further concern with them. This reduces sensibly the didactic efficiency of the drama, on account of which writers have from time to time been attracted to the stage; for if the individual is so much inclined to hypnotic suggestion that he cannot shake off the emotions he has felt when his personality was fused in that of the audience, he is not a safe

person to be trusted alone, and should promptly be shut up in an asylum.

The acute reader of the foregoing remarks will see at once that they reduce dramatic criticism to a logical absurdity. I wish for the sake of those who follow this calling that I could have concealed the fact from him. But the deduction is too obvious. The critic trains himself not to be influenced by the passions of the people who surround him, but in so doing he does not see the play which they see. His rôle is to keep free from the contagion of the audience. But the audience is so much part of the play that you cannot judge it unless you are the audience. He aims at holding aloof from popular clamour, but it is only by popular clamour, the thrill that passes through the house, the excitement of propinquity, that the play exists. Only one form of criticism is logically reasonable. If a critic were so sensitive to the emotion about him that he could feel it in all its subtlety and if he had at the same time the power to stand outside himself and note his sensations, his criticism would be, to the playwright at least, exceedingly useful. But I suppose that a man with such gifts would in these democratic days rule empires rather than write dramatic criticism.

OUR BETTERS

A COMEDY

in Three Acts

CHARACTERS

LADY GRAYSTON

DUCHESS DE SURENNES

PRINCIPESSA DELLA CERCOLA

ELIZABETH SAUNDERS

ARTHUR FENWICK

THORNTON CLAY

FLEMING HARVEY

ANTHONY PAXTON

LORD BLEANE

POLE

ERNEST

The action of the play takes place at LADY GRAYSTON'S house in Grosvenor Street, Mayfair, and at her husband's place in Suffolk, Abbots Kenton.

OUR BETTERS

THE FIRST ACT

SCENE: *The drawing-room at LADY GRAYSTON'S house in Grosvenor Street, Mayfair. It is a sumptuous double room, of the period of George II., decorated in green and gold, with a coromandel screen and lacquer cabinets; but the coverings of the chairs, the sofas and cushions, show the influence of Bakst and the Russian Ballet; they offer an agreeable mixture of rich plum, emerald green, canary and ultra-marine. On the floor is a Chinese carpet, and here and there are pieces of Ming pottery.*

It is about half-past four, early in the season, and a fine day.

When the curtain rises, from the street below is heard the melancholy chant of the lavender man.

Won't you buy my sweet lavender?
Sixteen blue branches for a penny.
If you buy it once,
You'll buy it twice,
For it makes your clothes
Smell very nice—
Sweet-scented lavender.

BESSIE SAUNDERS *comes in. She is a very pretty American girl, of twenty-two, with fair hair and blue eyes. She is dressed in the latest mode. She wears a hat and gloves, and carries a bag. She has just come in from the street. She has in her hand a telephone message, and going over to the telephone she takes up the receiver.*

BESSIE: Gerrard 4321. Is that the Berkeley? Put me

through to Mr. Harvey, please. Fleming Harvey, that's right. [*She listens and smiles.*] Yes. Who d'you think it is? [*She laughs.*] I've just got your telephone message. Where have you sprung from? That's fine. How long are you staying in London? I see. I want to see you at once. Nonsense. This very minute. Now just jump into a taxi and come right away. Pearl will be in presently. Ring off, Fleming. No, I will not ring off first. [*A pause.*] Are you there? How tiresome you are. You might be half-way here by now. Well, hustle.

[*She puts down the receiver and begins to take off her gloves. POLE, the butler, comes in with a bunch of roses.*]

POLE: These flowers have just come for you, miss.

BESSIE: Oh! Thank you. Aren't they lovely? You must give me something to put them in, Pole.

POLE: I'll bring a vase, miss.

[*He goes out. She buries her face in the flowers and inhales their fragrance. The BUTLER enters with a bowl filled with water.*]

BESSIE: Thank you. You're sure they *are* for me? There's no label.

POLE: Yes, miss. The person who brought them said they was for you, miss. I asked if there wasn't a card, and he said no, miss.

BESSIE:[*With a faint smile.*] I think I know who they're from. [*She begins to arrange the flowers.*] Her ladyship hasn't come in yet, has she?

POLE: Not yet, miss.

BESSIE: D'you know if anyone is coming in to tea?

POLE: Her ladyship didn't say, miss.

BESSIE: You'd better prepare for fifteen, then.

POLE: Very good, miss.

BESSIE: I was being funny, Pole.

POLE: Yes, miss? Shall I take the paper away, miss?

BESSIE: [*With a slight sigh of resignation.*] Yes, do, will you?
[*The telephone bell rings.*] Oh, I forgot, I switched the telephone on here. See who it is.

[*POLE takes up the receiver and listens, then puts his hand over its mouth.*]

POLE: Will you speak to Lord Bleane, miss?

BESSIE: Say I'm not at home.

POLE: Miss Saunders hasn't come in yet. I beg pardon, my lord. I didn't recognise your lordship's voice. [*A pause.*] Well, my lord, I did hear them say there was a private view they thought of going to at the Grosvenor. You might find Miss Saunders there.

BESSIE: You needn't elaborate, Pole.

POLE: I was only making it more convincing, miss. [*Listening.*] I think so, my lord. Of course, I couldn't say for certain, my lord; they might have gone out to Ranelagh.

BESSIE: Really, Pole!

POLE: Very good, my lord. [*He puts down the receiver.*] His lordship asked if you was expected in to tea, miss.

BESSIE: I see.

POLE: Is there anything else, miss?

BESSIE: No, Pole, thank you.

[*He goes out. She finishes arranging the flowers. The door is flung open and LADY GRAYSTON comes in, followed by FLEMING HARVEY. PEARL—LADY GRAYSTON—is a handsome, dashing creature, a woman of thirty-four, with red hair, and a face outrageously painted. She is dressed in a Paris frock, but of greater daring both in colour and cut than a Frenchwoman would wear. FLEMING is a nice-looking young American in clothes that were obviously made in New York.*]

PEARL: My dear Bessie, I've found an entirely strange young man on the doorstep who says he is a cousin.

BESSIE: [*Giving him her hands enthusiastically.*] Fleming.

FLEMING: I introduced myself to Lady Grayston. She drove up just as they were opening the door. Please reassure your sister, Bessie. She looks upon me with suspicion.

BESSIE: You must remember Fleming Harvey, Pearl.

PEARL: I've never set eyes on him in my life. But he looks quite nice.

BESSIE: He is.

PEARL: He's apparently come to see you.

FLEMING: I rang up five minutes ago and Bessie ordered me to come round right away.

PEARL: Well, make him stop to tea. I've got to telephone. I've suddenly remembered that I've asked twelve people to dinner.

BESSIE: Does George know?

PEARL: Who is George?

BESSIE: Don't be absurd, Pearl. George—your husband.

PEARL: Oh! I couldn't make out who you meant. No, he doesn't know. But what's much more important, the cook doesn't know either. I'd forgotten George was in London. [*She goes out.*]

BESSIE: George generally dines out when Pearl is giving a party, because he doesn't like people he doesn't know, and he seldom dines at home when we're alone, because it bores him.

FLEMING: It doesn't sound as if Sir George enjoyed many of the benefits of home life.

BESSIE: Now let's sit down and make ourselves comfortable. You are going to stay to tea, aren't you?

FLEMING: It's not a beverage that I'm in the habit of imbibing.

BESSIE: When you've been in England a month you won't be able to do without it. When did you land?

FLEMING: This morning. You see, I've lost no time in coming to see you.

BESSIE: I should think not. It *is* good to see someone straight from home.

FLEMING: Have you been having a good time, Bessie?

BESSIE: Wonderful! Since the beginning of the season, except when Pearl has had people here, I've been out to lunch and dinner every day, and I've been to a ball every night, generally two and sometimes three.

FLEMING: Geel

BESSIE: If I stopped now I'd drop down dead.

FLEMING: D'you like England?

BESSIE: I adore it. I think it's too bad of dad never to have let me come over to London before. Rome and Paris are nothing. We're just trippers there, but here we're at home.

FLEMING: Don't get too much at home, Bessie.

BESSIE: Oh, Fleming, I never thanked you for sending me the roses. It was perfectly sweet of you.

FLEMING: [*With a smile.*] I didn't send you any roses.

BESSIE: Didn't you? Well, why didn't you?

FLEMING: I hadn't time. But I will.

BESSIE: It's too late now. I naturally thought they were from you, because Englishmen don't send flowers in the same way as American boys do.

FLEMING: Is that so?

[There is a slight pause. BESSIE gives him a quick look.]

BESSIE: Fleming, I want to thank you for that charming letter you wrote me.

FLEMING: There's no occasion to do that, Bessie.

BESSIE: I was afraid you might feel badly about it. But we'll always be the greatest friends, won't we?

FLEMING: Always.

BESSIE: After all, you were eighteen when you asked me to marry you, and I was sixteen. It wasn't a very serious engagement. I don't know why we didn't break it off before.

FLEMING: I suppose it never occurred to us.

BESSIE: I'd almost forgotten it, but when I came over here I thought I'd better make everything quite clear.

FLEMING: [*With a smile.*] Bessie, I believe you're in love.

BESSIE: No, I'm not. I tell you I'm having a wonderful time.

FLEMING: Well, who sent you the roses?

BESSIE: I don't know. Lord Bleane.

FLEMING: You're not going to marry a lord, Bessie?

BESSIE: Have you any objection?

FLEMING: Well, on first principles, I think American girls had better marry American men, but then I happen to be an American man.

[*BESSIE looks at him for a moment.*]

BESSIE: Pearl gave a dinner party last night. I was taken in by a cabinet minister, and on the other side of me I had an ambassador. Just opposite was a man who'd been Viceroy in India. Madame Angelotti dined with us, and she sang afterwards, and a lot of people came on from an official dinner in their stars and ribands. Pearl looked superb. She's a wonderful hostess, you know. Several people told me they would rather come here than to any house in London. Before Pearl married George Grayston she was engaged to a boy who was in business in Portland, Oregon.

FLEMING: [*Smiling.*] I see you're quite determined to marry a lord.

BESSIE: No, I'm not. I'm keeping an open mind on the subject.

FLEMING: What d'you mean by that?

BESSIE: Well, Fleming, it hasn't escaped my notice that a certain noble lord is not unwilling to lay his beautiful coronet at my feet.

FLEMING: Don't talk like a novelette, Bessie.

BESSIE: But it feels just like a novelette. The poor dear is trying to propose to me every time he sees me, and I'm doing all I can to prevent him.

FLEMING: Why?

BESSIE: I don't want to refuse him, and then wish I hadn't.

FLEMING: You could easily make him ask you again. Women find that so simple.

BESSIE: Ah, but supposing he went right away to shoot big game in Africa. It's what they do, you know, in novelettes.

FLEMING: I'm reassured about one thing. You're not in the least in love with him.

BESSIE: I told you I wasn't. You don't mind my saying all this to you, Fleming?

FLEMING: Gracious, no; why should I?

BESSIE: You're sure you don't feel sore at my throwing you over?

FLEMING: [*Cheerfully.*] Not a bit.

BESSIE: I am glad, because then I can tell you all about the noble lord.

FLEMING: Has it occurred to you that he wants to marry you for your money?

BESSIE: You can put it more prettily. You can say that he wants to marry me with my money.

FLEMING: And is that a prospect that allures you?

BESSIE: Poor dear, what else can he do? He's got a large place to keep up, and he simply hasn't a cent.

FLEMING: Really, Bessie, you amaze me.

BESSIE: I shan't when you've been here a month.

[PEARL comes in.]

PEARL: Now, Bessie, tell me all about this strange young man.

BESSIE: He's quite capable of telling you about himself.

PEARL: [To FLEMING.] How long are you staying?

FLEMING: A couple of months. I want to see something of English life.

PEARL: I see. D'you want to improve your mind or d'you want to go into society?

FLEMING: I suppose I couldn't combine the two.

PEARL: Are you rich?

FLEMING: Not at all.

PEARL: It doesn't matter, you're good-looking. If one wants to be a success in London one must either have looks, wit, or a bank-balance. You know Arthur Fenwick, don't you?

FLEMING: Only by reputation.

PEARL: How superciliously you say that!

FLEMING: He provides bad food to the working classes of the United States at an exorbitant price. I have no doubt he makes a lot of money.

BESSIE: He's a great friend of Pearl's.

PEARL: When he first came over because they turned up their noses at him in New York, I said to him: My dear Mr. Fenwick, you're not good-looking, you're not amusing, you're not well-bred, you're only rich. If you want to get into society you must spend money.

FLEMING: It was evidently in the nature of a straight talk.

BESSIE: We must do what we can for Fleming, Pearl.

PEARL: [*With a chuckle.*] We'll introduce him to Minnie Surennes.

FLEMING: Who in the world is she?

PEARL: The Duchesse de Surennes. Don't you remember? She was a Miss Hodgson. Chicago people. Of course, they're nobody in America, but that doesn't matter over here. She adores good-looking boys, and I daresay she's getting rather tired of Tony. [*To BESSIE.*] By the way, they're coming in this afternoon.

BESSIE: I don't like Tony.

PEARL: Why not? I think he's charming. He's the most unprincipled ruffian I ever met.

FLEMING: Is Tony the duke?

PEARL: What duke? Her husband? Oh no, she divorced him years ago.

BESSIE: I think Fleming would like the Princess much better.

PEARL: Oh, well, he'll meet her here to-day, too.

BESSIE: She was a Miss van Hoog, Fleming.

FLEMING: Is she divorced too?

PEARL: Oh no, her husband's an Italian. It's very difficult to get a divorce in Italy. She's only separated. She's quite nice. She's one of my greatest friends. She bores me a little.

[*POLE comes in to announce THORNTON CLAY and then goes out. THORNTON CLAY is a stout American with a bald head and an effusive manner. He is somewhat overdressed. He speaks with a marked American accent.*]

POLE: Mr. Thornton Clay.

CLAY: How d'you do?

PEARL: You're the very person we want, Thornton. An entirely strange young man has suddenly appeared on my doorstep, and says he's my cousin.

CLAY: My dear Pearl, that is a calamity which we Americans must always be prepared for.

BESSIE: I won't have you say such things, Mr. Clay. Fleming is not only our cousin, but he's my very oldest friend. Aren't you, Fleming?

PEARL: Bessie has a charming nature. She really thinks that friendship puts one under an obligation.

FLEMING: Since you're talking of me, won't you introduce me to Mr. Clay?

PEARL: How American you are!

FLEMING: [*Smiling.*] It's not unnatural, is it?

PEARL: Over here we haven't the passion that you have in America for introducing people. My dear Thornton, allow me to present to you my long-lost cousin, Mr. Fleming Harvey.

CLAY: It's so long since I was in America that I almost forget, but I believe the proper answer to that is: Mr. Fleming Harvey, I'm pleased to make your acquaintance.

FLEMING: Aren't you an American, Mr. Clay?

CLAY: I won't deny that I was born in Virginia.

FLEMING: I beg your pardon, I thought from the way you spoke . . .

CLAY: [*Interrupting.*] But, of course, my home is London.

PEARL: Nonsense, Thornton, your home is wherever there's a first-class hotel.

CLAY: I went to America seven years ago. My father died and I had to go and settle up his affairs. Everyone took me for an Englishman.

FLEMING: That must have gratified you very much, Mr. Clay.

CLAY: Of course, I haven't a trace of an American accent. I suppose that was the reason. And then my clothes.

[He looks down at them with satisfaction.]

PEARL: Fleming wants to see life in London, Thornton. He can't do better than put himself under your wing.

CLAY: I know everyone who's worth knowing. I can't deny that.

PEARL: Thornton calls more countesses by their Christian names than any man in town.

CLAY: I'll get him cards for some good balls, and I'll see that he's asked to one or two of the right parties.

PEARL: He's good-looking, and I'm sure he dances well. He'll be a credit to you, Thornton.

CLAY: [*To FLEMING.*] But, of course, there's really nothing I *can* do for you. At Lady Grayston's you are in the very hub of society. I don't mean the stuffy, old-fashioned society, that goes about in barouches and bores itself stiff, but the society that counts, the society that figures in the newspapers. Pearl is the most wonderful hostess in London.

PEARL: What *do* you want, Thornton?

CLAY: In this house, sooner or later, you'll meet every remarkable man in England except one. That is George Grayston. And he's only remarkable because he's her husband.

PEARL: [*With a buckle.*] I might have known you were only saying a pleasant thing in order to make the next one more disagreeable.

CLAY: Of course, I can't make out why you never ask George to your parties. Personally I like him.

PEARL: That's all the nicer of you, Thornton, since he always speaks of you as that damned snob.

CLAY: [*With a shrug of the shoulders.*] Poor George, he has such a limited vocabulary. I met Flora della Cercola at luncheon to-day. She told me she was coming to tea with you.

PEARL: She's getting up a concert in aid of something or other, and she wants me to help her.

CLAY: Poor Flora, with her good works! She takes philanthropy as a drug to allay the pangs of unrequited love.

PEARL: I always tell her she'd do much better to take a lover.

CLAY: You'll shock Mr. Harvey.

PEARL: It won't hurt him. It'll do him good.

CLAY: Did you ever know her husband?

PEARL: Oh yes, I met him. Just the ordinary little Dago. I cannot imagine why she should ever have been in love with him. She's an extraordinary creature. D'you know, I'm convinced that she's never had an affair.

CLAY: Some of these American women are strangely sexless.

FLEMING: I have an idea that some of them are even virtuous.

PEARL: [*With a smile.*] It takes all sorts to make a world.

[POLE enters to announce the DUCHESS DE SURENNES, and then goes out.]

POLE: The Duchesse de Surennes.

[*The DUCHESS is a large, dark woman of forty-five with scarlet lips and painted cheeks, a woman of opulent form, bold, self-assured and outrageously sensual. She suggests a drawing of a Roman Emperor by Aubrey Beardsley. She is gowned with a certain dashing magnificence, and wears a long string of large pearls round her neck. During the conversation POLE and two footmen bring in tea, and place it in the back drawing-room.*]

PEARL: My dear, how nice of you to come.

DUCHESSE: Isn't Tony here?

PEARL: No.

DUCHESSE: He said he was coming straight here.

PEARL: I daresay he's been delayed.

DUCHESSE: I can't understand it. He telephoned a quarter of an hour ago that he was starting at once.

PEARL: [*Reassuringly.*] He'll be here presently.

DUCHESSE: [*With an effort over herself.*] How pretty you're looking, Bessie. No wonder all the men I meet rave about you.

BESSIE: Englishmen are so shy. Why don't they rave *to* me?

DUCHESSE: They'll never let you go back to America.

PEARL: Of course, she's never going back. I'm determined that she shall marry an Englishman.

CLAY: She'll make a charming addition to our American peeresses.

PEARL: And there'll be another that you can call by her Christian name, Thornton.

BESSIE: I wish you wouldn't talk as if I hadn't a word to say in the matter.

CLAY: Of course, you've got a word to say, Bessie—a very important one.

BESSIE: Yes, I suppose?

CLAY: Exactly.

PEARL: Pour out the tea, darling, will you?

BESSIE: Surely. [*To CLAY.*] I know you don't share Fleming's contempt for tea, Mr. Clay.

CLAY: I couldn't live a day without it. Why, I never travel without a tea basket.

FLEMING: [*Ironically.*] Is that so?

CLAY: You Americans who live in America . . .

FLEMING: [*Under his breath.*] So queer of us.

CLAY: Despise the delectable habit of drinking tea because you are still partly barbarous. The hour that we spend

over it is the most delightful of the day. We do not make a business of eating as at luncheon or dinner. We are at ease with ourselves. We toy with pretty cakes as an excuse for conversation. We discuss the abstract, our souls, our morals; we play delicately with the concrete, our neighbour's new bonnet or her latest lover. We drink tea because we are a highly civilised nation.

FLEMING: I must be very stupid, but I don't follow.

CLAY: My dear fellow, the degree of a nation's civilisation is marked by its disregard for the necessities of existence. You have gone so far as to waste money, but we have gone farther; we waste what is infinitely more precious, more transitory, more irreparable—we waste time.

DUCHESS: My dear Thornton, you fill me with despair. Compton Edwardes has cut me off my tea. I thought he was only depriving me of a luxury, now I see he's depriving me also of a religious rite.

FLEMING: Who in heaven's name is Compton Edwardes, that he should have such influence?

PEARL: My dear Fleming, he's the most powerful man in London. He's the great reducer.

FLEMING: Gracious! What does he reduce?

PEARL: Fat.

DUCHESS: He's a perfect marvel, that man. Do you know, the Duchess of Arlington told me he'd taken nine pounds off her.

PEARL: My dear, that's nothing. Why, Clara Hollington gave me her word of honour she'd lost over a stone.

BESSIE: [*From the tea-table.*] Anyone who wants tea must come and fetch it.

[The men saunter over to the next room, while PEARL and the DUCHESS go on with their conversation.]

DUCHESS: Who is that nice-looking young man, Pearl?

PEARL: Oh, he's a young American. He pretends to be a cousin of mine. He's come to see Bessie.

DUCHESS: Does he want to marry her?

PEARL: Good heavens, I hope not. He's only an old friend. You know the funny ways they have in America.

DUCHESS: I suppose nothing is really settled about Harry Bleane?

PEARL: No. But I shouldn't be surprised if you saw an announcement in the Morning Post one day.

DUCHESS: Has she enough money for him?

PEARL: She has a million.

DUCHESS: Not pounds?

PEARL: Oh no, dollars.

DUCHESS: That's only eight thousand a year. I shouldn't have thought he'd be satisfied with that.

PEARL: People can't expect so much nowadays. There won't be any more enormous heiresses as there were in your time. Besides, Harry Bleane isn't such a catch as all that. Of course, it's better to be an English baron than an Italian count, but that's about all you can say for it.

DUCHESS: Of course she'll accept him?

PEARL: Oh yes, she's crazy to live in England. And as I tell her, it's quite pleasant to be a peeress even now.

DUCHESS: What on earth can have happened to Tony?

PEARL: My dear, he's not likely to have been run over by a motor-bus.

DUCHESS: I'm not afraid of motor-buses running over him; I'm afraid of him running after Gaiety girls.

PEARL: [*Drily.*] I should have thought you kept a very sharp eye on him.

DUCHESS: You see, he hasn't got anything to do from morning till night.

PEARL: Why doesn't he get a job?

DUCHESS: I've been trying to get him something, but it's so difficult. You've got such a lot of influence, Pearl. Can't you do something? I should be so grateful.

PEARL: What can he do?

DUCHESS: Anything. And as you know he's very good-looking.

PEARL: Does he know French and German?

DUCHESS: No, he has no gift for languages.

PEARL: Can he type and write shorthand?

DUCHESS: Oh, no. Poor dear, you can hardly expect that.

PEARL: Can he do accounts?

DUCHESS: No, he has no head for figures.

PEARL: [*Reflectively.*] Well, the only thing I can see that he'd do for is a government office.

DUCHESS: Oh, my dear, if you only could manage that. You can't think what a comfort it would be for me to know that he couldn't get into mischief at least from ten to four every day.

[*POLE announces TONY PAXTON. TONY is a handsome youth of twenty-five, in beautiful clothes, with engaging manners and a charming smile.*]

POLE: Mr. Paxton.

PEARL: Well, Tony, how is life?

TONY: Rotten. I haven't backed a winner or won a rubber this week.

PEARL: Ah well, that's the advantage of not having money, you can afford to lose it.

DUCHESS: [*Bursting in.*] Where have you been, Tony?

TONY: I? Nowhere.

DUCHESS: You said you were coming straight here. It doesn't take twenty-five minutes to get here from Dover Street.

TONY: I thought there wasn't any hurry. I was just hanging about the club.

DUCHESS: I rang up the club again, and they said you'd gone.

TONY: [*After a very slight pause.*] I was downstairs having a shave, and I suppose they never thought of looking for me in the barber's shop.

DUCHESS: What on earth did you want to be shaved for at half-past four in the afternoon?

TONY: I thought you'd like me to look nice and clean.

PEARL: Go and get Bessie to give you some tea, Tony; I'm sure you want it after the strenuous day you've had.

[He nods and walks into the inner room.]

PEARL: Minnie, how can you be so silly? You can't expect to keep a man if you treat him like that.

DUCHESS: I know he's lying to me, there's not a word of truth in anything he says: but he's so slim I can never catch him out. Oh, I'm so jealous.

PEARL: Are you really in love with him?

DUCHESS: He's everything in the world to me.

PEARL: You shouldn't let yourself be carried away like this.

DUCHESS: I'm not cold-blooded like you.

PEARL: You seem to have a passion for rotters, and they always treat you badly.

DUCHESS: Oh, I don't care about the others. Tony is the only one I've ever really loved.

PEARL: Nonsense! You were just as much in love with Jack Harris. You did everything in the world for him. You taught him to wear his clothes. You got him into society. And the moment he could do without you he chucked you. Tony will do just the same.

DUCHESS: I'm not going to be such a fool this time. I'm going to take care he can't do without me.

PEARL: I can't imagine what you see in him. You must know that . . .

DUCHESS: [*Interrupting.*] There's very little I don't know. He's a liar, a gambler, an idler, a spendthrift, but in his way he is fond of me. [*Appealingly.*] You can see he's fond of me, can't you?

PEARL: He's so much younger than you, Minnie.

DUCHESS: I can't help it. I love him.

PEARL: Oh, well, I suppose it's no good talking. As long as he makes you happy.

DUCHESS: He doesn't. He makes me miserable. But I love him. . . . He wants me to marry him, Pearl.

PEARL: You're not going to?

DUCHESS: No, I won't be such a fool as that. If I married him I'd have no hold over him at all.

[*Enter POLE to announce the PRINCESS DELLA CERCOLA. She is a tall, thin woman of thirty-five, with a pale, baggared face and great dark eyes. She is a gentle, kind creature, but there is something pathetic, almost tragic, in her appearance. She is dressed, though very well, and obviously by a Paris dressmaker, more quietly than the DUCHESS or PEARL. She has not only wealth, but distinction.*]

POLE: Princess della Cercola.

[*Exit. PEARL gets up to receive her. They kiss.*]

PEARL: Darling!

PRINCESS: D'you hate me for coming to bother you? I ran up because I know how difficult you are to catch. [*Kissing the DUCHESS.*] How are you, Minnie?

DUCHESS: Don't ask me for a subscription, Flora. I'm so poor.

PRINCESS: [*Smiling.*] Wait till I tell you what it's for, and then you'll remember that you had a father called Spencer Hodgson.

DUCHESSE: [*With a little groan.*] As if I wanted to be reminded of it!

PEARL: You're so absurd, Minnie. You should make a joke of the pork. I always tell people about father's hardware store, and when I haven't got a funny story to tell about it, I invent one.

PRINCESS: You've made your father quite a character in London.

PEARL: That's why I never let him come over. He couldn't possibly live up to his reputation.

[FLEMING HARVEY *comes forward from the inner room.*]

FLEMING: I'm going to say good-bye to you.

PEARL: You mustn't go before I've introduced you to Flora. Flora, this is Mr. Fleming Harvey. He's just come from America. He probably carries a six-shooter in his hip-pocket.

FLEMING: I'm told I mayn't say I'm pleased to make your acquaintance, Princess.

PRINCESS: When did you land?

FLEMING: This morning.

PRINCESS: I envy you.

FLEMING: Because I landed this morning?

PRINCESS: No, because a week ago you were in America.

DUCHESSE: Floral

FLEMING: I was beginning to think it was something to be rather ashamed of.

PRINCESS: Oh, you mustn't pay any attention to Pearl and the Duchesse. They're so much more English than the English.

PEARL: I notice you show your devotion to the country of your birth by staying away from it, Flora.

PRINCESS: Last time I was in America it made me so unhappy that I vowed I'd never go there again.

DUCHESS: I was there ten years ago, when I was divorcing Gaston. I hadn't been in America since my marriage, and I'd forgotten what it was like. Oh, it was so crude. Oh, it was so provincial. You don't mind my saying so, Mr. Harvey?

FLEMING: Not at all. You're just as American as I am, and there's no reason why among ourselves we shouldn't abuse the mother that bore us.

DUCHESS: Oh, but I don't look upon myself as American. I'm French. After all, I haven't a trace of an American accent. To show you how it got on my nerves, I almost didn't divorce Gaston because I thought I couldn't bring myself to stay in America long enough.

PRINCESS: It's not because it was crude and provincial that I was unhappy in America. I was unhappy because after all it was home, the only real home I've ever had, and I was a stranger.

PEARL: My dear Flora, you're being very sentimental.

PRINCESS: [*Smiling.*] I'm sorry; I apologise. You're a New Yorker, Mr. Harvey?

FLEMING: I'm proud of it, madam.

PRINCESS: New York's wonderful, isn't it? It has something that no other city in the world has got. I like to think of Fifth Avenue on a spring day. The pretty girls in their smart frocks and neat shoes, who trip along so gaily, and all the good-looking boys.

DUCHESS: I grant you that; some of the boys are too lovely for words.

PRINCESS: Everyone is so strong and confident. There's such an exaltation in the air. You feel in the passers-by a serene and unshakable belief in the future. Oh, it's very good to be alive in Fifth Avenue on a sunny day in April.

FLEMING: It's good for an American to hear another American say such pleasant things about his country.

PRINCESS: You must come and see me, and you shall tell me all the news of home.

PEARL: How high the newest building is, and how much money the latest millionaire has got.

FLEMING: Good-bye.

PEARL: Have you made friends with Thornton Clay?

FLEMING: I hope so.

PEARL: You must get him to give you the address of his tailor.

FLEMING: Aren't you pleased with my clothes?

PEARL: They're very American, you know.

FLEMING: So am I.

[THORNTON CLAY comes forward. The DUCHESS strolls over to the inner room and is seen talking with BESSIE and TONY PAXTON.]

PEARL: Thornton, I was just telling Mr. Harvey that you'd take him to your tailor.

CLAY: I was going to suggest it.

FLEMING: My clothes are not at all a success.

PEARL: Who d'you go to? Stultz?

CLAY: Of course. He's the only tailor in London. [To FLEMING.] Of course he's a German, but art has no nationality.

FLEMING: I'm pleased at all events to think that it's a German tailor who's going to make me look like an Englishman.

[He goes out. THORNTON makes his farewells.]

CLAY: Good-bye, Pearl.

PEARL: Are you going? Don't forget you're coming down to Kenton on Saturday.

CLAY: I won't, indeed. I adore your week-end parties, Pearl. I'm so exhausted by Monday morning that I'm fit for nothing for the rest of the week. Good-bye.

[He shakes hands and goes out. As he is going, POLE opens the door to announce LORD BLEANE. He is a young man, very English in appearance, pleasant, clean and well-groomed.]

POLE: Lord Bleane.

[Exit.]

PEARL: Dear Harry, how nice of you to come.

BLEANE: I'm in absolute despair.

PEARL: Good heavens, why?

BLEANE: They're sending a mission to Rumania to hand the Garter to some bigwig and I've got to go with it.

PEARL: Oh, but that'll be very interesting.

BLEANE: Yes, but we start to-morrow, and I shan't be able to come down to Kenton on Saturday.

PEARL: When do you come back?

BLEANE: In four weeks.

PEARL: Then come down to Kenton the Saturday after that.

BLEANE: May I?

PEARL: You must go and break the news to Bessie. She was so looking forward to your visit.

BLEANE: D'you think she'll give me some tea?

PEARL: I have no doubt, if you ask her nicely.

[He goes over to the inner room.]

PRINCESS: Now I've got you to myself for two minutes. You will help me with my concert, won't you?

PEARL: Of course. What do you want me to do? I'll make Arthur Fenwick take any number of tickets. You know how charitable he is.

PRINCESS: It's for a very good cause.

PEARL: I'm sure it is. But don't harrow me with revolting stories of starving children. I'm not interested in the poor.

PRINCESS: *[Smiling.]* How can you say that?

PEARL: Are you? I often wonder if your philanthropy isn't an elaborate pose. You don't mind my saying that, do you?

PRINCESS: [*Good-humouredly.*] Not at all. You have no heart, and you can't imagine that anyone else should have.

PEARL: I have plenty of heart, but it beats for people of my own class.

PRINCESS: I've only found one thing really worth doing with all this money I have, and that is to help a little those who need help.

PEARL: [*With a shrug.*] So long as it makes you happy.

PRINCESS: It doesn't, but it prevents me from being utterly miserable.

PEARL: You make me so impatient, Flora. You've got more money than you know what to do with. You're a princess. You've practically got rid of your husband. I cannot imagine what more you want. I wish I could get rid of mine.

PRINCESS: [*Smiling.*] I don't know what you've got to complain of in George.

PEARL: That's just it. I shouldn't mind if he beat me or made love to chorus girls. I could divorce him then. Oh, my dear, thank your stars that you had a husband who was grossly unfaithful to you. Mine wants me to live nine months of the year in the country and have a baby every five minutes. I didn't marry an Englishman for that.

PRINCESS: Why *did* you marry him?

PEARL: I made a mistake. I'd lived all my life in New York. I was very ignorant. I thought if you were a baronet you must be in society.

PRINCESS: I often wonder if you're happy, Pearl.

PEARL: Do you? Of course I'm happy.

PRINCESS: An ambassador told me the other day that you were the most powerful woman in London. It's very

wonderful how you've made your way. You had nothing very much to help you.

PEARL: Shall I tell you how it was done? By force of character, wit, unscrupulousness and push.

PRINCESS: [*Smiling.*] You're very frank.

PEARL: That has always been my pose.

PRINCESS: I sometimes think there's positive genius in the way you've ignored the snubs of the great.

PEARL: [*With a chuckle.*] You're being very unpleasant, Flora.

PRINCESS: And there's something very like heroism in the callousness with which you've dropped people when they've served your turn.

PEARL: You're driving me to the conclusion that you don't altogether approve of me.

PRINCESS: On the other hand I can't help admiring you. You've brought all the determination, insight, vigour, strength, which have made our countrymen turn America into what it is, to get what you wanted. In a way your life has been a work of art. And what makes it more complete is that what you've aimed at is trivial, transitory and worthless.

PEARL: My dear Flora, people don't hunt in order to catch a fox.

PRINCESS: Sometimes, doesn't it make you rather nervous, when you're sitting on the top of your ladder, in case anyone should give it a kick as he passes?

PEARL: It'll want more than a kick to topple my ladder over. D'you remember when that silly woman made such a fuss because her husband was in love with me? It wasn't till I only just escaped the divorce court that the duchesses really took me up.

[*The DUCHESS comes forward with TONY PAXTON.*]

DUCHESS: We really must be going, Pearl. I expect my masseur at six. Compton Edwardes told me about him. He's wonderful, but he's so run after, if you keep him waiting a moment he goes away.

PEARL: My dear, do be careful. Fanny Hallam got herself down to a mere nothing, but it made her look a hundred.

DUCHESS: Oh, I know, but Compton Edwardes has recommended to me a wonderful woman who comes every morning to do my face.

PEARL: You are coming to my ball, aren't you?

DUCHESS: Of course we're coming. Yours are almost the only parties in London where one amuses oneself as much as at a night club.

PEARL: I'm having Ernest to come in and dance.

DUCHESS: I thought of having him one evening. How much does he charge for coming in socially?

PEARL: Twenty guineas.

DUCHESS: Good heavens, I could never afford that.

PEARL: What nonsense! You're far richer than I am.

DUCHESS: I'm not so clever, darling. I can't think how you do so much on your income.

PEARL: [*Amused.*] I'm a very good manager.

DUCHESS: One would never think it. Good-bye, dear. Are you coming, Tony?

TONY: Yes. [*She goes out.*]

TONY: [*Shaking hands with PEARL.*] I've not had a word with you to-day.

PEARL: [*Chaffing him.*] What are we to do about it?

PRINCESS: I *must* get Minnie to go to my concert. Minnie.
[*She goes out. TONY is left face to face with PEARL.*]

TONY: You're looking perfectly divine to-day. I don't know what there is about you.

PEARL: [*Amused, but not disconcerted.*] It is nice of you to say so.

TONY: I simply haven't been able to take my eyes off you.

PEARL: Are you making love to me?

TONY: That's nothing new, is it?

PEARL: You'll get into trouble.

TONY: Don't be disagreeable, Pearl.

PEARL: I don't remember that I ever told you you might call me Pearl.

TONY: It's how I think of you. You can't prevent me from doing that.

PEARL: Well, I think it's very familiar.

TONY: I don't know what you've done to me. I think of you all day long.

PEARL: I don't believe it for a minute. You're an unprincipled ruffian, Tony.

TONY: Do you mind?

PEARL: [*With a chuckle.*] Shameless creature. I wonder what it is that Minnie sees in you.

TONY: I have all sorts of merits.

PEARL: I'm glad you think so. I can only discover one.

TONY: What is that?

PEARL: You're somebody else's property.

TONY: Oh!

PEARL: [*Holding out her hand.*] Good-bye.

[He kisses her wrist. His lips linger. She looks at him from under her eyelashes.]

PEARL: It doesn't make you irresistible, you know.

TONY: There's always the future.

PEARL: The future's everybody's property.

TONY: [*In an undertone.*] Pearl.

PEARL: Be quick and go. Minnie will be wondering why you don't come.

[He goes out. PEARL turns away with a smile. BESSIE and LORD BLEANE advance into the room.]

PEARL: Has Harry broken the news to you that he can't come down to us on Saturday?

[The PRINCESS comes in.]

PRINCESS: I've got my subscription.

PEARL: I kept Tony up here as long as I could so as to give you a chance.

PRINCESS: *[With a laugh.]* That was really tactful.

PEARL: Poor Minnie, she's as mean as cat's meat. *[With a glance at BESSIE and LORD BLEANE.]* If you'd like to come down to the morning-room we can go through my visitors' book and see who'll be useful to you.

PRINCESS: Oh, that would be kind of you.

PEARL: *[To BLEANE.]* Don't go till I come back, will you? I haven't had a word with you yet.

BLEANE: All right.

[PEARL and the PRINCESS go out.]

BESSIE: I wonder if you sent me these flowers, Lord Bleane?

BLEANE: I did. I thought you wouldn't mind.

BESSIE: It was very kind of you.

[She takes two of the roses and puts them in her dress.]

BLEANE is overcome with shyness. He does not know how to begin.

BLEANE: D'you mind if I light a cigarette?

BESSIE: Not at all.

BLEANE: *[As he lights it.]* D'you know, this is the first time I've ever been alone with you. It was very tactful of Lady Grayston to leave us.

BESSIE: I'm not sure if it wasn't a trifle too tactful.

BLEANE: I was hoping most awfully to have the chance of getting a talk with you.

*[The song of the lavender is heard again in the street.
BESSIE welcomes the diversion.]*

BESSIE: Oh, listen, there's the lavender man come back again
[She goes to the window and listens.] Throw him down a shilling, will you?

BLEANE: All right. *[He takes a coin from his pocket and throws it into the street.]*

BESSIE: I seem to feel all the charm of England in that funny little tune. It suggests cottage gardens, and hedges, and winding roads.

BLEANE: My mother grows lavender at home. When we were kids we were made to pick it, and my mother used to put it in little muslin bags and tie them up with pink ribbon. And she used to put them under the pillows of one's bed and in all the drawers. Shall I ask her to send you some?

BESSIE: Oh, that would be such a bother for her.

BLEANE: It wouldn't. She'd like to. And you know, it's not like the lavender you buy. It knocks spots off anything you can get in shops.

BESSIE: You must hate leaving London at this time of year.

BLEANE: Oh, I'm not very keen on London. *[Making a dash for it.]* I hate leaving you.

BESSIE: *[With comic desperation.]* Let's not talk about me, Lord Bleane.

BLEANE: But that's the only topic that occurs to me.

BESSIE: There's always the weather in England.

BLEANE: You see, I'm off to-morrow.

BESSIE: I never saw anyone so obstinate.

BLEANE: I shan't see you again for nearly a month. We haven't known one another very long, and if I hadn't

been going away I expect I'd have thought it better to wait a bit.

BESSIE: [*Clasping her hands.*] Lord Bleane, don't propose to me.

BLEANE: Why not?

BESSIE: Because I shall refuse you.

BLEANE: Oh!

BESSIE: Tell me about the part of the country you live in. I don't know Kent at all. Is it pretty?

BLEANE: I don't know. It's home.

BESSIE: I love those old Elizabethan houses that you have in England with all their chimneys.

BLEANE: Oh, ours isn't a show place, you know. It's just a rather ugly yellow brick house that looks like a box, and it's got a great big stucco portico in front of it. I think the garden's rather jolly.

BESSIE: Pearl hates Abbots Kenton. She'd sell it if George would. She's only really happy in London.

BLEANE: I don't know that I was so particularly struck on Bleane till I was over in France. When I was in hospital at Boulogne there didn't seem much to do but to think about things. . . . It didn't seem as if I *could* get well. I knew I should if they'd only let me come home, but they wouldn't; they said I couldn't be moved. . . . It's rather bleak in our part of the country. We've got an east wind that people find a bit trying, but if you've been used to it all your life it bucks you up wonderful. In summer it can be awfully hot down there, but there's always something fresh and salt in the air. You see, we're so near the marshes. . . . It was only just across the water, and it seemed such an awful long way off. I ain't boring you, am I?

BESSIE: No. I want you to tell me.

BLEANE: It's a funny sort of country. There are a lot of green fields and elm trees, and the roads wind about—it's rotten for motoring; and then you have the marshes, with dykes in them—we used to jump them when we were boys, and fall in mostly; and then there's the sea. It doesn't sound much, but I felt it was the most ripping thing I knew. And then there are hop-fields—I forgot them—and the oast-houses. They're rather picturesque, I suppose. I expect it's like the lavender to you. To me it's just England.

[BESSIE gets up and walks towards the window. In the distance is heard the melancholy cry of the lavender man.]

BLEANE: What are you thinking about?

BESSIE: It must be very wonderful to feel like that about one's home. I've never known anything but a red stone house in Nineteenth Street. As soon as dad can get a decent offer for it we're going to move further up town. Mother has a fancy for Seventy-Second Street, I don't know why.

BLEANE: Of course, I know it couldn't mean the same to a girl that it means to me. I shouldn't expect anyone to live there always. I can be quite happy in London.

BESSIE: [With a smile.] You're determined to do it?

BLEANE: If you *could* bring yourself to marry me, I'd try and give you a good time.

BESSIE: Well, I suppose that's a proposal.

BLEANE: I've never made one before, and it makes me a bit nervous.

BESSIE: You haven't said anything that I can answer yes or no to.

BLEANE: I don't want to say anything that you *can* answer no to.

BESSIE: [With a chuckle.] Let me say that I'll think it over, may I?

BLEANE: I'm going away to-morrow.

BESSIE: I'll give you an answer when you come back.

BLEANE: But that won't be for four weeks.

BESSIE: It'll give us both a chance to make up our minds.

After all, it *is* rather a serious step. You may come to the conclusion that you don't really want to marry me.

BLEANE: There's no fear of that.

BESSIE: You're coming down to Kenton for the week-end after you get back. If you change your mind send Pearl a wire putting yourself off. I shall understand, and I shan't be in the least hurt or offended.

BLEANE: Then it's good-bye till then.

BESSIE: Yes. And . . . thank you very much for wishing to marry me.

BLEANE: Thank you very much for not refusing me outright.

[They shake hands and he goes out. She walks over to the window to look at him, glances at the watch on her wrist, and then leaves the room. In a moment POLE shows in ARTHUR FENWICK. He is a tall, elderly man with a red face and grey hair.]

POLE: I'll tell her ladyship you're here, sir.

FENWICK: That'll be very good of you.

POLE goes out. FENWICK takes a cigar from his case, and the evening paper from a table, and settles himself down comfortably to read and smoke. He makes himself very much at home. PEARL comes in.

PEARL: Aren't Bessie and Harry Bleane here?

FENWICK: No.

PEARL: That's very strange. I wonder what can have happened.

FENWICK: Never mind about Bessie and Harry Bleane. Give me your attention now.

PEARL: You're very late.

FENWICK: I like to come when I stand a chance of finding you alone, girlie.

PEARL: I wish you wouldn't call me girlie, Arthur. I do hate it.

FENWICK: That's how I think of you. When I'm present at one of your big set-outs, and watch you like a queen among all those lords and ambassadors and bigwigs, I just say to myself, She's my girlie, and I feel warm all over. I'm so proud of you then. You've got there, girlie, you've got there.

PEARL: [*Smiling.*] You've been very kind to me, Arthur.

FENWICK: You've got brains, girlie, that's how you've done it. It's brains. Underneath your flighty ways and that casual air of yours, so that one might think you were just enjoying yourself and nothing more, I see you thinking it all out, pulling a string here and a string there; you've got them in the hollow of your hand all the time. You leave nothing to chance, Pearl, you're a great woman.

PEARL: Not great enough to make you obey your doctor's orders.

FENWICK: [*Taking the cigar out of his mouth.*] You're not going to ask me to throw away the first cigar I've had to-day?

PEARL: To please me, Arthur. They're so bad for you.

FENWICK: If you put it like that I must give in.

PEARL: I don't want you to be ill.

FENWICK: You've got a great heart, girlie. The world just thinks you're a smart, fashionable woman, clever, brilliant, beautiful, a leader of fashion, but I know different. I know you've got a heart of gold.

PEARL: You're a romantic old thing, Arthur.

FENWICK: My love for you is the most precious thing I have in the world. You're my guiding star, you're my ideal.

You stand to me for all that's pure and noble and clean in womanhood. God bless you, girlie. I don't know what I should do if you failed me. I don't believe I could live if I ever found out that you weren't what I think you.

PEARL: [*With her tongue in her cheek.*] You shan't, if I can help it.

FENWICK: You do care for me a little, girlie?

PEARL: Of course I do.

FENWICK: I'm an old man, girlie.

PEARL: What nonsense! I look upon you as a mere boy.

FENWICK: [*Flattered.*] Well, I expect a good many young men would be glad to have my physique. I can work fourteen hours on end and feel as fresh as a daisy at the end of it.

PEARL: Your vitality is wonderful.

FENWICK: I sometimes wonder what it is that first drew you to me, girlie.

PEARL: I don't know. I suppose it was the impression of strength you give.

FENWICK: Yes, I've often been told that. It's very difficult for people to be with me long without realising that—well, that I'm not just the man in the street.

PEARL: I always feel I can rely on you.

FENWICK: You couldn't have said anything to please me better. I want you to rely on me. I know you. I'm the only man who's ever understood you. I know that, deep down in that big, beating, human heart of yours, you're a timid, helpless little thing, with the innocence of a child, and you want a man like me to stand between you and the world. My God, how I love you, girlie!

PEARL: Take care, there's the butler.

FENWICK: Oh, damn it, there's always the butler.

[*POLE comes in with a telegram and a parcel of books.*

PEARL: [*Taking the telegram and glancing at the parcel.*] What's that, Pole?

POLE: They're books, my lady. They've just come from Hatchard's.

PEARL: Oh, I know. Undo them, will you? [*POLE cuts open the parcel and takes out a bundle of four or five books. PEARL opens the telegram.*] Oh, bother! There's no answer, Pole.

POLE: Very good, my lady.

[*Exit.*]

FENWICK: Is anything the matter?

PEARL: That fool Sturrey was dining here to-night, and he's just wired to say he can't come. I do hate having my parties upset. I'd asked ten people to meet him.

FENWICK: That's too bad.

PEARL: Pompous owl. He's refused invitation after invitation. I asked him six weeks ago this time, and he hadn't the face to say he was engaged.

FENWICK: Well, I'm afraid you must give him up. I daresay you can do without him.

PEARL: Don't be a fool, Arthur. I'll get hold of him somehow. He may be Prime Minister one of these days. [*She reflects a moment.*] I wonder what his telephone number is. [*She gets up and looks in a book, then sits down at the telephone.*] Gerrard 7035. If he comes once because I force him to he'll come again because he likes it. This house is like the kingdom of heaven: I have to compel them to come in. . . . Is Lord Sturrey in? Lady Grayston. I'll hold the line. [*Making her voice sweet and charming.*] Is that you, Lord Sturrey? It's Pearl Grayston speaking. I just rang up to say it doesn't matter a bit about to-night. Of course, I'm disappointed you can't come. But you must come another day, will you? That's very nice of you. How about this day week?

Oh, I'm sorry. Would Thursday suit you? Oh! Well, how about Friday? You're engaged every evening next week? You are in demand. Well, I'll tell you what, get your book and tell me what day you are free.

FENWICK: You're the goods, girlic. You'll get there.

PEARL: Tuesday fortnight. Yes, that'll suit me beautifully. 8.30. I'm so glad you chose that day, because I'm having Kreisler in to play. I shall look forward to seeing you. Good-bye. [*She puts down the receiver.*] This time I've got him. The ape thinks he understands music.

FENWICK: Have you got Kreisler for Tuesday fortnight?

PEARL: No.

FENWICK: Are you sure you can get him?

PEARL: No, but I'm sure you can.

FENWICK: You shall have him, girlic. [*She takes the books that POLE brought in and puts them about the room. One she places face downwards, open.*] What are you doing that for?

PEARL: They're Richard Twining's books. He's coming to dinner to-night.

FENWICK: Why d'you trouble about authors, girlic?

PEARL: London isn't like New York, you know. People like to meet them over here.

FENWICK: I should have thought your position was quite strong enough to do without them.

PEARL: We live in a democratic age. They take the place in society of the fools whom kings kept about their courts in the middle ages. They have the advantage that they don't presume on their position to tell one home truths. They're cheap. A dinner and a little flattery is all they want. And they provide their own clothes.

FENWICK: You litter up your house with their rotten books.

PEARL: Oh, but I don't keep them. These are on approval. I shall send them all back to the bookseller to-morrow morning.

FENWICK: Pearl, you're a little wonder. When you want to go into business you come to me and I'll take you into partnership.

PEARL: How is business?

FENWICK: Fine! I'm opening two new branches next week. They laughed at me when I first came over here. They said I'd go bankrupt. I've turned their silly old methods upside down. He laughs longest who laughs last.

PEARL: [*Reflectively.*] Ah, I can't help thinking that's what my dressmaker said when she sent me in my bill.

[*He gives a slight start and looks at her shrewdly. He sees her blandly smiling.*]

FENWICK: Girlie, you promised me you wouldn't run up any more bills.

PEARL: That's like promising to love, honour, and obey one's husband, the kind of undertaking no one is really expected to carry out.

FENWICK: You naughty little thing.

PEARL: It's Suzanne—you know, the dressmaker in the Place Vendôme. The war has dislocated her business and she wants to get her money in. It isn't very convenient for me to pay just at present. It's rather a large sum. [*She gives him a sheaf of typewritten documents.*]

FENWICK: This looks more like a five-act play than a bill.

PEARL: Clothes are expensive, aren't they? I wish I could dress in fig-leaves. It would be cheap, and I believe it would suit me.

FENWICK: [*Putting the bill in his pocket.*] Well, I'll see what I can do about it.

PEARL: You are a duck, Arthur. . . . Would you like me to come and lunch with you to-morrow?

FENWICK: Why, sure.

PEARL: All right. Now you must go, as I want to lie down before I dress for dinner.

FENWICK: That's right. Take care of yourself, girlie, you're very precious to me.

PEARL: Good-bye, dear old thing.

FENWICK: Good-bye, girlie.

[He goes out. As he goes to the door the telephone rings.]

PEARL takes up the receiver.

PEARL: You're speaking to Lady Grayston. Tony! Of course I knew your voice. Well, what is it? I'm not at all stern. I'm making my voice as pleasant as I can. I'm sorry you find it disagreeable. *[She gives a chuckle.]* No, I'm afraid I couldn't come to tea to-morrow. I shall be engaged all the afternoon. What is the day after to-morrow? *[Smiling.]* Well, I must ask Bessie. I don't know if she's free. Of course I'm not coming alone. It would be most compromising. A nice-looking young man like you. What would Minnie say? Oh, I know all about that. . . . I didn't promise anything. I merely said the future was everybody's property. A sleepless night. Fancy! Well, good-bye. . . . Tony, do you know the most enchanting word in the English language? Perhaps.

[She puts down the telephone quickly, and the curtain falls.]

END OF THE FIRST ACT

THE SECOND ACT

The Scene is a morning-room at Abbots Kenton, the Graystons place in the country. It has an old-fashioned, comfortable look; nothing is very new; the chintzes are faded. Three long french windows lead on to a terrace.

It is after dinner, a fine night, and the windows are open.

The women of the party are sitting down, waiting for the men; they are PEARL and BESSIE, the DUCHESSE DE SURENNES and the PRINCESS DELLA CERCOLA.

PRINCESS: You must be exhausted after all the tennis you played this afternoon, Minnie.

DUCHESSE: Not a bit. I only played four sets.

PRINCESS: You played so vigorously. It made me quite hot to look at you.

DUCHESSE: If I didn't take exercise I should be enormous. Oh, Flora, how I envy you! You can eat anything you choose and it has no effect on you. And what makes it so unfair is that you don't care about food. I am a lazy and a greedy woman. I never eat any of the things I like, and I never miss a day without taking at least an hour's exercise.

PRINCESS: [*Smiling.*] If mortification is the first step in sanctity, I'm sure you must be on the high road to it.

PEARL: One of these days you'll give up the struggle, Minnie, and, like Flora, take to good works.

DUCHESSE: [*With immense decision.*] Never! I shall lie on my death-bed with my hair waved and a little rouge on my cheeks, and with my last breath murmur: Not gruel, it's so fattening.

PEARL: Well, you'll have more serious tennis to-morrow. Harry Bleane plays much better than Thornton.

DUCHESS: It was very tiresome of him not to come till it was just time to dress.

PEARL: He only got back from Rumania yesterday, and he had to go down to see his mother. [*With an amused glance at her sister.*] Bessie asked me not to put him next her at dinner.

BESSIE: Pearl, you are a cat! I do think it's hateful the way you discuss my private affairs with all and sundry.

DUCHESS: My dear Bessie, they've long ceased to be your private affairs.

PEARL: I'm afraid Bessie misses her opportunities. Just before he went to Rumania I left them alone together, and nothing happened. All my tact was wasted.

BESSIE: Your tact was too obvious, Pearl.

DUCHESS: Well, do be quick and bring him to the scratch, my dear. I'm growing tired of people asking me, Is he going to propose or is he not?

BESSIE: Don't they ever ask, Is she going to accept him or is she not?

DUCHESS: Of course, you'll accept him.

BESSIE: I'm not so sure.

PRINCESS: [*Smiling.*] Perhaps it depends on the way he asks.

PEARL: For heaven's sake, don't expect too much romance. Englishmen aren't romantic. It makes them feel absurd. George proposed to me when he was in New York for the Horse Show. I wasn't very well that day, and I was lying down. I was looking a perfect fright. He told me all about a mare he had, and he told me all about her father and her mother and her uncles and her aunts, and then he said: [*Imitating him.*] Look here, you'd better marry me.

PRINCESS: How very sudden.

PEARL: Oh, I said, why didn't you tell me you were going to propose? I'd have had my hair waved. Poor George, he asked *Why?*

DUCHESS: The French are the only nation who know how to make love. When Gaston proposed to me he went down on his knees, and he took my hand, and he said he couldn't live without me. Of course I knew that, because he hadn't a cent, but still it thrilled me. He said I was his guiding star and his guardian angel—*oh, I don't know what!* It was beautifull I knew he'd been haggling with papa for a fortnight about having his debts paid; but it was beautiful.

PRINCESS: Were you quite indifferent to him?

DUCHESS: Oh, quite. I'd made up my mind to marry a foreigner. People weren't very nice to us in Chicago. My cousin Mary had married the Count de Moret, and mother couldn't bear Aunt Alice. She said, If Alice has got hold of a Count for Mary, I'm determined that you shall have a Duke.

PEARL: And you did.

DUCHESS: I wish you could have seen the fuss those Chicago people made of me when I went over last. It was hard to realise that I used to cry my eyes out because I wasn't asked to the balls I wanted to go to.

PRINCESS: Still, I hope Bessie won't marry any man she doesn't care for.

PEARL: My dear, don't put ideas in the child's head. The French are a much more civilised nation than we are, and they've come to the conclusion long ago that marriage is an affair of convenience rather than of sentiment. Think of the people you know who've married for love. After five years do they care for one another any more than the people who've married for money?

PRINCESS: They have the recollection.

PEARL: Nonsense! As if anyone remembered an emotion when he no longer felt it!

DUCHESS: It's true. I've been in love a dozen times, desperately, and when I've got over it and look back, though I remember I was in love, I can't for the life of me remember my love. It always seems to me so odd.

PEARL: Believe me, Bessie, the flourishing state of father's hardware store is a much sounder basis for matrimonial happiness than any amount of passion.

BESSIE: Oh, Pearl, what is this you've been telling people about dad selling bananas?

PEARL: Bananas? Oh, I remember. They were saying that Mrs. Hanley used to wash the miners' clothes in California. That and her pearls are taking her everywhere. I wasn't going to be outdone, so I said father used to sell bananas in the streets of New York.

BESSIE: He never did anything of the kind.

PEARL: I know he didn't, but I thought people were getting rather tired of the hardware store, and I made a perfectly killing story out of it. I had a new Callot frock on and I thought I could manage the bananas.

DUCHESS: A most unpleasant vegetable. So fattening.

[*The men come in.* THORNTON CLAY, ARTHUR FENWICK, and FLEMING. PEARL and BESSIE get up.]

BESSIE: You've been a long time.

DUCHESS: Where is Tony?

CLAY: He and Bleane are finishing their cigars.

DUCHESS: Well, Mr. Harvey, are you still enjoying life in London?

CLAY: He should be. I've got him invitations to all the nicest parties. But he will waste his time in sight-seeing. The other day—Thursday, wasn't it?—I wanted to take him to Hurlingham, and he insisted on going to the National Gallery instead.

PEARL: [*Smiling.*] What an outrageous proceeding!

FLEMING: I don't see that it was any more outrageous for me than for you. I saw you coming in just as I was going out.

PEARL: I had a reason to go. Arthur Fenwick has just bought a Bronzino, and I wanted to see those in the National Gallery.

DUCHESS: I think it's much more likely that you had an assignation. I've always heard it's a wonderful place for that. You never meet any of your friends, and if you do they're there for the same purpose, and pretend not to see you.

FLEMING: I certainly only went to see the pictures.

CLAY: But, good heavens, if you want to do that there's Christie's, and there you *will* meet your friends.

FLEMING: I'm afraid you'll never make a man of fashion out of me, Thornton.

CLAY: I'm beginning to despair. You have a natural instinct for doing the wrong thing. D'you know, the other day I caught him in the act of delivering half a bagful of letters of introduction? I implored him to put them in the waste-paper basket.

FLEMING: I thought as people had taken the trouble to give them to me, it was only polite to make use of them.

CLAY: Americans give letters so carelessly. Before you know where you are you'll know all the wrong people. And, believe me, the wrong people are very difficult to shake off.

FLEMING: [*Amused.*] Perhaps some of my letters are to the right people.

CLAY: Then they'll take no notice of them.

FLEMING: It looks as though the wrong people had better manners than the right ones.

CLAY: The right people *are* rude. They can afford to be.

I was a very young man when I first came to London, and I made mistakes. All of us Americans make mistakes. It wanted a good deal of character to cut people who'd taken me about, asked me to dine, stay with them in the country, and heaven knows what, when I found they weren't the sort of people one ought to know.

PEARL: Of course, one has to do it.

DUCHESS: Of course. It shows that you have a nice nature, Thornton, to worry yourself about it.

CLAY: *I'm curiously sentimental. Another of our American faults.* I remember when I'd been in London two or three years, I knew pretty well everyone that was worth knowing, but I'd never been asked to Hereford House. The duchess doesn't like Americans anyway, and she'd been very disagreeable about me in particular. But I was determined to go to her ball. I felt it wasn't the sort of function I could afford to be left out of.

PEARL: They're very dull balls.

CLAY: I know, but they're almost the only ones you can't go to without an invitation. Well, I found out that the duchess had a widowed sister who lived in the country with her two daughters. Lady Helen Blair. My dear, she was a very stuffy, dowdy woman of fifty-five, and her two daughters were stuffier and dowdier still, and if possible, older. They were in the habit of coming up to London for the season. I got introduced to them, and I laid myself out. I took them to the play, I showed them round the Academy, I stood them luncheons, I gave them cards for private views, for a month I worked like a Trojan. Then the duchess sent out her invitations, and the Blair girls had half a dozen cards for their young men. I received one, and, by George, I'd earned it. Of course, as soon as I got my invitation I dropped them, but you know I felt quite badly about it.

DUCHESS: I expect they're used to that.

CLAY: A strangely tactless woman, Lady Helen Blair. She wrote and asked me if I was offended about anything because I never went near them.

PEARL: I wish those men would come, and then we could dance.

DUCHESS: Oh, that'll be charming! It's such good exercise, isn't it? I'm told that you dance divinely, Mr. Harvey.

FLEMING: I don't know about that. I dance.

DUCHESS: [*To the PRINCESS.*] Oh, my dear, who d'you think I danced with the other night? [*Impressively.*] Ernest.

PRINCESS: Oh!

DUCHESS: My dear, don't say, Oh! like that. Don't you know who Ernest is?

PEARL: Ernest is the most sought after man in London.

PRINCESS: You don't mean the dancing-master?

DUCHESS: Oh, my dear, you mustn't call him that. He'd be furious. He isn't a professional. He gives lessons at ten guineas an hour, but only to oblige. He's invited to all the best dances.

FLEMING: One of the things that rather surprised me at balls was to see all these dancing-masters. Do English girls like to be pawed about by Greeks, Dagos and Bowery toughs?

CLAY: You Americans who live in America, you're so prudish.

DUCHESS: Believe me, I would go to *any* dance where there was the remotest chance of meeting Ernest. It's a perfect dream to dance with him. He showed me a new step, and I can't get it quite right. I don't know what I shall do if I don't run across him again very soon.

PRINCESS: But why don't you let him give you a lesson?

DUCHESS: My dear, ten guineas an hour! I couldn't possibly afford that. I'm sure to meet him at a dance in a day or two, and I shall get a lesson for nothing.

PEARL: You ought to make him fall in love with you.

DUCHESS: Oh, my dear, if he only would! But he's so run after.

[BLEANE and TONY PAXTON come in from the terrace.

DUCHESS: At last!

TONY: We've been taking a stroll in the garden.

PEARL: I hope you showed him my tea-house.

BESSIE: It's Pearl's new toy. You must be sure to admire it.

PEARL: I'm very proud of it. You know, George won't let me do anything here. He says it's his house, and he isn't going to have any of my muck. He won't even have new chintzes. Well, there was an old summer-house just over there, and it was all worm-eaten and horrid and tumble-down, what they call picturesque, but it was rather a nice place to go and have tea in as it had a really charming view; I wanted to pull it down and put up a smart Japanese tea-house instead, but George wouldn't hear of it, because, if you please, his mother—a peculiarly plain woman—used to sit and sew there. Well, I bided my time, and the other day, when George was in London, I pulled down the old summer-house, got my Japanese tea-house down from town, put it up, and had everything finished by the time George came back twenty-four hours later. He very nearly had an apoplectic stroke. If he had I should have killed two birds with one stone.

BESSIE: Pearl!

PRINCESS: I don't know why you've furnished it so elaborately.

PEARL: Well, I thought in the hot weather I'd sleep there sometimes. It'll be just like sleeping in the open air.

FENWICK: These young people want to start dancing, Pearl.

PEARL: Where would you like to dance, in here with the gramophone, or in the drawing-room with the pianola?

BESSIE: Oh, in the drawing-room.

PEARL: Let's go there then.

BESSIE: [*To CLAY.*] Come and help me get the rolls out.

CLAY: Right you are.

[They go out, followed by the DUCHESS and PEARL, TONY, FENWICK, and BLEANE.]

FLEMING: [*To the PRINCESS.*] Aren't you coming?

PRINCESS: No, I think I'll stay here for the present. But don't bother about me. You must go and dance.

FLEMING: There are enough men without me. I'm sure Thornton Clay is a host in himself.

PRINCESS: You don't like Thornton?

FLEMING: He's been very kind to me since I came to London.

PRINCESS: I was watching your face when he told that story about the Hereford ball. You must learn to conceal your feelings better.

FLEMING: Didn't you think it was horrible?

PRINCESS: I've known Thornton for ten years. I'm used to him. And as you say yourself, he's very kind.

FLEMING: That's what makes life so difficult. People don't seem to be good or bad as the squares on a chessboard are black or white. Even the worthless ones have got good traits, and it makes it so hard to know how to deal with them.

PRINCESS: [*Smiling a little.*] You don't approve of poor Thornton?

FLEMING: What do you expect me to think of a man who's proud of having forced his way into a house where he

knew he wasn't wanted? He reckons success by the number of invitations he receives. He holds himself up to me as an example. He tells me that if I want to get into society, I must work for it. What do they think of a man like Thornton Clay in England? Don't they despise him?

PRINCESS: Everywhere, in New York just as much as in London, there are masses of people struggling to get into society. It's so common a sight that one loses the sense of there being anything disgraceful in it. Pearl would tell you that English society is a little pompous; they welcome a man who can make them laugh. Thornton is very useful. He has high spirits, he's amusing, he makes a party go.

FLEMING: I should have thought a man could find some better use for his life than that.

PRINCESS: Thornton has plenty of money. Do you think there is any point in his spending his life making more? I sometimes think there's too much money in America already.

FLEMING: There are things a man can do beside making money.

PRINCESS: You know, American wealth has reached a pitch when it was bound to give rise to a leisured class. Thornton is one of the first members of it. Perhaps he doesn't play the part very well, but remember he hasn't had the time to learn it that they've had in Europe.

FLEMING: [*Smiling.*] I'm afraid you don't think me very charitable.

PRINCESS: You're young. It's a real pleasure to me to know a nice clean American boy. And I'm so glad that you're not going to be dazzled by this English life that dazzles so many of our countrymen. Amuse yourself, learn what you can from it, take all the good it offers you, and go back to America.

FLEMING: I shall be glad to go back. Perhaps I ought never to have come.

PRINCESS: I'm afraid you're not very happy.

FLEMING: I don't know what makes you think that.

PRINCESS: It's not very hard to see that you're in love with Bessie.

FLEMING: Did you know that I was engaged to her?

PRINCESS: [*Surprised.*] No.

FLEMING: I was engaged to her before I went to Harvard. I was eighteen then, and she was sixteen.

PRINCESS: How very early in life you young people settle things in America!

FLEMING: Perhaps it was rather silly and childish. But when she wrote and told me that she thought we'd better break it off, I discovered I cared more than I thought.

PRINCESS: What did you say to her?

FLEMING: I couldn't try to hold her to a promise she gave when she was a schoolgirl. I answered that I sympathised and understood.

PRINCESS: When did this happen?

FLEMING: A couple of months ago. Then I got the chance to go over to Europe and I thought I'd come to see what was going on. It didn't take me long to tumble.

PRINCESS: You're bearing it very well.

FLEMING: Oh, the only thing I could do was to be pleasant. I should only have bored her if I'd made love to her. She took our engagement as an amusing joke, and there wasn't anything for me to do but accept her view of it. She was having the time of her life. At first I thought perhaps she'd grow tired of all these balls and parties, and then if I was on the spot I might persuade her to come back to America with me.

PRINCESS: You may still.

FLEMING: No, I haven't a chance. The first day I arrived she told me how wonderful she thought this English life. She thinks it full and varied. She thinks it has beauty.

PRINCESS: That sounds rather satirical.

FLEMING: Pearl has been very nice to me. She's taken me about, I've driven with her constantly, I've sat in her box at the opera, I'm her guest at the moment. If I had any decency I'd hold my tongue.

PRINCESS: Well?

FLEMING: [*Bursting out impetuously.*] There's something in these surroundings that makes me feel terribly uncomfortable. Under the brilliant surface I suspect all kinds of ugly and shameful secrets that everyone knows and pretends not to. This is a strange house in which the husband is never seen and Arthur Fenwick, a vulgar sensualist, acts as host; and it's an attractive spectacle, this painted duchess devouring with her eyes a boy young enough to be her son. And the conversation—I don't want to seem a prude, I daresay people over here talk more freely than the people I've known; but surely there are women who don't have lovers, there are such things as honour and decency and self-restraint. If Bessie is going to remain over here I wish to God she'd marry her lord at once and get out of it quickly.

PRINCESS: D'you think she'll be happy?

FLEMING: Are they any of them happy? How can they expect to be happy when they marry for . . . [*The PRINCESS gives a sudden start, and FLEMING stops short.*] I beg your pardon. I was forgetting. Please forgive me. You see, you're so different.

PRINCESS: I'm sorry I interrupted you. What were you going to say?

FLEMING: It wasn't of any importance. You see, I've been thinking it over so much that it's rather got on my

nerves. And I haven't been able to tell anyone what I was thinking about. I'm dreadfully sorry.

PRINCESS: You were going to say, how can they expect to be happy when they marry for a trumpery title? You thought, they're snobs, vulgar snobs, and the misery of their lives is the proper punishment for their ignoble desires.

FLEMING: [*Very apologetically.*] Princess.

PRINCESS: [*Ironically.*] Princess.

FLEMING: Believe me, I hadn't the smallest intention of saying anything to wound you.

PRINCESS: You haven't. It's too true. Most of us who marry foreigners are merely snobs. But I wonder if it's all our fault. We're not shown a better way of life. No one has even hinted to us that we have any duty towards our own country. We're blamed because we marry foreigners, but columns are written about us in the papers, and our photographs are in all the magazines. Our friends are excited and envious. After all, we are human. At first, when people addressed me as Princess, I couldn't help feeling thrilled. Of course it was snobbishness.

FLEMING: You make me feel a terrible cad.

PRINCESS: But sometimes there've been other motives, too. Has it ever occurred to you that snobbishness is the spirit of romance in a reach-me-down? I was only twenty when I married Marino. I didn't see him as a fortune-hunting Dago, but as the successor of a long line of statesmen and warriors. There'd been a pope in his family, and a dozen cardinals, one of his ancestors had been painted by Titian; for centuries they'd been men of war, with power of life and death; I'd seen the great feudal castle, with its hundred rooms, where they had ruled as independent sovereigns. When Marino came and asked me to marry him it was romance that

stood in his shoes and beckoned to me. I thought of the palace in Rome, which I had visited as a tripper, and where I might reign as mistress. I thought it was splendid to take my place after all those great ladies, Orsinis, Colonnas, Gaetanis, Aldobrandinis. I loved him.

FLEMING: But there's no need to tell me that you could never do anything from an unworthy motive.

PRINCESS: My husband's family had been ruined by speculation. He was obliged to sell himself. He sold himself for five million dollars. And I loved him. You can imagine the rest. First he was indifferent to me, then I bored him, and at last he hated me. Oh, the humiliation I endured. When my child died I couldn't bear it any longer; I left him. I went back to America. I found myself a stranger. I was out of place, the life had become foreign to me; I couldn't live at home. I settled in England; and here we're strangers too. I've paid very heavily for being a romantic girl.

[BESSIE comes in.

BESSIE: Really, Fleming, it's too bad of you to sit in here and flirt with the Princess. We want you to come and dance.

[The PRINCESS, agitated, gets up and goes out into the garden.]

BESSIE: [Looking after her.] Is anything the matter?

FLEMING: No.

BESSIE: Are you coming to dance, or are you not?

FLEMING: I had quite a talk with Lord Bleane after dinner, Bessie.

BESSIE: [Smiling.] Well?

FLEMING: Are you going to accept the coronet that he's dangling before your eyes?

BESSIE: It would be more to the point if you asked whether I'm going to accept the coronet that he's laying at my feet.

FLEMING: He's a very nice fellow, Bessie.

BESSIE: I know that.

FLEMING: I wanted to dislike him.

BESSIE: Why?

FLEMING: Well, I don't think much of these English lords who run after American girls for their money. I expected him to be a brainless loafer, with just enough cunning to know his market value, but he's a modest, unassuming fellow. To tell you the truth, I'm puzzled.

BESSIE: [*Chaffing him.*] Fancy that!

FLEMING: I think it's a low-down thing that he's doing, and yet he doesn't seem a low-down fellow.

BESSIE: He might be in love with me, you know.

FLEMING: Is he?

BESSIE: No.

FLEMING: Are you going to marry him?

BESSIE: I don't know.

FLEMING: I suppose he's come here to ask you?

BESSIE: [*After a short pause.*] He asked me a month ago. I promised to give him an answer when he came back from Rumania. . . . I'm in a panic. He's waiting to get me alone. I was able to be quite flippant about it when I had a month before me, but now, when I've got to say yes or no, I'm so jumpy I don't know what to do with myself.

FLEMING: Don't marry him, Bessie.

BESSIE: Why not?

FLEMING: Well, first, you're no more in love with him than he is with you.

BESSIE: And then?

FLEMING: Isn't that enough?

BESSIE: I wonder if you realise what he offers me. Do you know what the position of an English peeress is?

FLEMING: Does it mean so much to be called Your Ladyship by tradesmen?

BESSIE: You donkey, Fleming. If I marry an American boy my life will be over; if I marry Harry Bleane it will be only just beginning. Look at Pearl. I could do what she's done; I could do more, because George Grayston isn't ambitious. I could make Harry do anything I liked. He would go into politics, and I should have a salon. Why, I could do anything.

FLEMING: [*Dryly.*] I don't know why you should be in a panic. You've evidently made up your mind. You'll have a brilliant marriage with crowds outside the church, your photograph will be in all the papers, you'll go away for your honeymoon, and you'll come back. What will you do then?

BESSIE: Why, settle down.

FLEMING: Will you break your heart like the Princess because your husband has taken a mistress, or will you take lovers like the Duchesse de Surennes, or will you bore yourself to death like Pearl because your husband is virtuous, and wants you to do your duty?

BESSIE: Fleming, you've got no right to say things like that to me.

FLEMING: I'm sorry if I've made you angry. I had to say it.

BESSIE: Are you quite sure that it's for my sake you don't want me to marry Lord Bleane?

FLEMING: Yes, I think it is. When you broke off our engagement I didn't blame you. You wouldn't have done it if you'd cared for me, and it wasn't your fault if you didn't. When I came over I saw that I could expect nothing but friendship from you. You must do me the justice to acknowledge that during this month I haven't given the smallest sign that I wanted anything else.

BESSIE: Oh, you've been charming. You always were the best friend I've had.

FLEMING: If in a corner of my heart I kept my love for you, that is entirely my affair. I don't know that it puts you to any inconvenience, and it pleases me. I'm quite sure that I'm only thinking now of your happiness. Go back to America, and fall in love with some nice fellow, and marry him. You'll have all my best wishes. Perhaps your life won't be so brilliant or so exciting, but it will be simpler and wholesomer, and more becoming.

BESSIE: You're a dear, Fleming, and if I said anything disagreeable just now, forgive me. I didn't mean it. I shall always want you to be my dearest friend.

[LORD BLEANE enters from the terrace.

BLEANE: I was looking for you everywhere. I wondered where you'd got to.

[There is a moment's pause. FLEMING HARVEY looks from BESSIE to BLEANE.

FLEMING: I really must go and dance with the Duchesse or she'll never forgive me.

BLEANE: I've just been dancing with her. My dear fellow, it's the most violent form of exercise I've ever taken.

FLEMING: I'm in very good condition.

[He goes out.

BLEANE: Blessings on him.

BESSIE: Why?

BLEANE: Because he's left us alone. Ask me another.

BESSIE: I don't think I will.

BLEANE: Then I'll ask you one.

BESSIE: Please don't. Tell me all about Rumania.

BLEANE: Rumania is a Balkan State. Its capital is Bucharest. It has long been known for its mineral springs.

BESSIE: You're in very high spirits to-night.

BLEANE: You may well wonder. Everything has conspired to depress them.

BESSIE: Oh, what nonsense!

BLEANE: First I was in England thirty-six hours before I had a chance of seeing you; secondly, when I arrived you'd already gone up to dress; then, when I was expecting to sit next you at dinner, I was put between Lady Grayston and the Princess; and, lastly, you made me pound away at that beastly pianola when I wanted to dance with you.

BESSIE: Well, you've survived it all.

BLEANE: What I want to point out to you is that if notwithstanding I'm in high spirits, I must have a most engaging nature.

BESSIE: I never dreamt of denying it.

BLEANE: So much to the good.

BESSIE: The man's going to propose to me.

BLEANE: No, I'm not.

BESSIE: I beg your pardon. My mistake.

BLEANE: I did that a month ago.

BESSIE: There's been a change of moon since then, and no proposal holds good after the new moon.

BLEANE: I never knew that.

BESSIE: You've been down to see your mother.

BLEANE: She sends you her love.

BESSIE: Have you told her?

BLEANE: I told her a month ago.

[BESSIE *does not speak for a moment; when she answers it is more gravely.*]

BESSIE: You know, I want to be frank with you. You won't think it disagreeable of me, will you? I'm not in love with you.

BLEANE: I know. But you don't positively dislike me?

BESSIE: No. I like you very much.

BLEANE: Won't you risk it then?

BESSIE: [*Almost tragically.*] I can't make up my mind.

BLEANE: I'll do all I can to make you happy. I'll try not to make a nuisance of myself.

BESSIE: I know quite well that I wouldn't marry you if you weren't who you are, and I'm afraid I know that you wouldn't marry me if I hadn't a certain amount of money.

BLEANE: Oh, yes, I would.

BESSIE: It's nice of you to say so.

BLEANE: Don't you believe it?

BESSIE: I suppose I'm a perfect fool. I ought to play the game prettily. You see, I know that you can't afford to marry a girl who isn't well-to-do. Everyone knows what I have. Pearl has taken good care that they should. You wouldn't ever have thought of me otherwise. We're arranging a deal. You give your title and your position, and I give my money. It's a commonplace thing enough, but somehow it sticks in my throat.

[BLEANE *hesitates a moment, and walks up and down thinking.*]

BLEANE: You make me feel an awful swine. The worst of it is that some part of what you say is true. I'm not such a fool that I didn't see your sister was throwing us together. I don't want to seem a conceited ass, but a fellow in my sort of position can't help knowing that many people think him rather a catch. Mothers of marriageable daughters are very transparent sometimes, you know, and if they don't marry their daughters they're determined it shan't be for want of trying.

BESSIE: Oh, I can quite believe that. I have noticed it in American mothers, too.

BLEANE: I knew it would be a good thing if I married you. I don't suppose I should have thought about you if I

hadn't been told you were pretty well off. It's beastly now, saying all that.

BESSIE: I don't see why.

BLEANE: Because after a bit I found out I'd fallen in love with you. And then I didn't care if you hadn't got a bob. I wanted to marry you because—because I didn't know what to do without you.

BESSIE: Harry!

BLEANE: Do believe me. I swear it's true. I don't care a hang about the money. After all, we could get along without it. And I love you.

BESSIE: It's very good to hear you say that. I'm so absurdly pleased and flattered.

BLEANE: You do believe it, don't you?

BESSIE: Yes.

BLEANE: And will you marry me?

BESSIE: If you like.

BLEANE: Of course I like. [*He takes her in his arms and kisses her.*]

BESSIE: Take care, someone might come in.

BLEANE: [*Smiling and happy.*] Come into the garden with me.

[*He stretches out his hand, she hesitates a moment, smiles, takes it, and together they go out on to the terrace.*]

For a moment the music of a one-step is heard more loudly, and then the DUCHESS and TONY PAXTON come in. She sinks into a chair fanning herself, and he goes over to a table, takes a cigarette, and lights it.

DUCHESS: Did you see? That was Harry Bleane and Bessie. I wondered where they were.

TONY: You've got eyes like a lynx.

DUCHESS: I'm positive they were hand in hand.

TONY: It looks as if she'd worked it at last.

DUCESSE: I don't know about that. It looks as if he'd worked it.

TONY: She's not such a catch as all that. If I were a peer I'd sell myself for a damned sight more than eight thousand a year.

DUCESSE: Don't stand so far away, Tony. Come and sit on the sofa by me.

TONY: [*Going over to her.*] I say, I've been talking to Bleane about two-seaters.

DUCESSE: [*Very coldly.*] Oh!

TONY: [*Giving her a look out of the corner of his eye.*] He says I can't do better than get a Talbot.

DUCESSE: I don't see why you want a car of your own. You can always use one of mine.

TONY: That's not the same thing. After all, it won't cost much. I can get a ripper for just over twelve hundred pounds, with a really smart body.

DUCESSE: You talk as though twelve hundred pounds were nothing at all.

TONY: Hang it all, it isn't anything to you.

DUCESSE: What with the income tax and one thing and another, I'm not so terribly flush just now. No one knows the claims I have on me. Because one has a certain amount of money one's supposed to be made of it. They don't realise that if one spends it in one way one can't spend it in another. It cost me seven thousand pounds to have my house redecorated.

TONY: [*Sulkily.*] You said I could buy myself a car.

DUCESSE: I said I'd think about it. I wasn't under the impression that you'd go and order one right away.

TONY: I've practically committed myself now.

DUCESSE: You only want a car so that you can be independent of me.

TONY: Well, hang it all, you can't expect me to be tied to your apron-strings always. It's a bit thick if whenever I want to take a man down to play golf I have to ring up and ask if I can have one of your cars. It makes me look such an ass.

DUCHESS: If it's only to play golf you want it, I'm sure anyone would rather go down to the links in a comfortable Rolls-Royce than in a two-seater.

[*A silence.*]

TONY: If you don't want to give me a car, why on earth did you say you would?

DUCHESS: [*Putting her hand on him.*] Tony.

TONY: For goodness' sake don't touch me.

DUCHESS: [*Hurt and mortified.*] Tony!

TONY: I don't want to force you to make me presents. I can quite well do without a two-seater. I can go about in omnibuses if it comes to that.

DUCHESS: Don't you love me?

TONY: I wish you wouldn't constantly ask me if I love you. It is maddening.

DUCHESS: Oh, how can you be so cruel to me!

TONY: [*Exasperated.*] D'you think this is quite the best place to choose to make a scene?

DUCHESS: I love you with all my heart. I've never loved anybody as much as I love you.

TONY: No man could stand being loved so much. D'you think it's jolly for me to feel that your eyes are glued on me whatever I'm doing? I can never put my hand out without finding yours there ready to press it.

DUCHESS: I can't help it if I love you. That's my temperament.

TONY: Yes, but you needn't show it so much. Why don't you leave me to do the love-making?

DUCESSE: If I did that there wouldn't be any love-making.

TONY: You make me look such a fool.

DUCESSE: Don't you know there's nothing in the world I wouldn't do for you?

TONY: [*Quickly.*] Well, why don't you marry me?

DUCESSE: [*With a gasp.*] I can't do that. You know that I can't do that.

TONY: Why not? You could still call yourself Duchesse de Surennes.

DUCESSE: No; I've always told you nothing would induce me to marry.

TONY: That shows how much you love me.

DUCESSE: Marriage is so middle-class. It takes away all the romance of love.

TONY: You simply want to have your freedom and keep me bound hand and foot. D'you think it's jolly for me to know what people say about me? After all, I have got some pride.

DUCESSE: I'm sure we shall be able to get you a job soon, and then no one will be able to say anything.

TONY: I'm getting fed up with the whole business; I tell you that straight. I'd just as soon chuck it.

DUCESSE: Tony, you don't mean to say you want to leave me. I'll kill myself if you do. I couldn't bear it, I couldn't bear it. I'll kill myself.

TONY: For God's sake, don't make such a row.

DUCESSE: Say you don't mean it, Tony. I shall scream.

TONY: After all, I've got my self-respect to think of. It seems to me the best thing would be if we put a stop to the whole thing now.

DUCESSE: Oh, I can't lose you. I can't.

TONY: No one can say I'm mercenary, but hang it all, one has to think of one's future. I shan't be twenty-five for ever. I ought to be settling down.

DUCESSE: Don't you care for me any more?

TONY: Of course I care for you. If I didn't, d'you think I'd have let you do all you have for me?

DUCESSE: Then why d'you make me so unhappy?

TONY: I don't want to make you unhappy, but really sometimes you are unreasonable.

DUCESSE: You mean about the car?

TONY: I wasn't thinking about the car then.

DUCESSE: You can have it if you like.

TONY: I don't want it now.

DUCESSE: Tony, don't be unkind.

TONY: I'm not going to take any more presents from you.

DUCESSE: I didn't mean to be unreasonable. I'd like you to have the car, Tony. I'll give you a cheque for it to-morrow. [*Coaxingly.*] Tell me what the body's like.

TONY: [*Sulkily.*] Oh, it's a torpedo body.

DUCESSE: You'll take me for drives in it sometimes?

[He turns round and looks at her, she puts out her hand, he thaws, and smiles engagingly.]

TONY: I say, you are awfully kind to me.

DUCESSE: You do like me a little, don't you?

TONY: Of course I do.

DUCESSE: You have a good heart, Tony. Kiss me.

TONY: [*Kissing her, pleased and excited.*] I saw an awfully jolly body in a shop in Trafalgar Square the day before yesterday. I've got half a mind to get the people who made your body to copy it.

DUCESSE: Why don't you get it at the shop you saw it at? My people are terribly expensive, and they aren't any better than anybody else.

TONY: Well, you see, I don't know anything about the firm. I just happened to catch sight of it as I was passing.

DUCHESS: What on earth were you doing in Trafalgar Square on Thursday? I thought you were going to Ranelagh.

TONY: I was put off. I hadn't got anything to do, so I thought I'd just slope round the National Gallery for half an hour.

DUCHESS: That's the last place I should have expected you to go to.

TONY: I don't mind having a look at pictures now and then.

[A sudden suspicion comes to the DUCHESS that he was there with PEARL, but she makes no sign that he can see.]

DUCHESS: *[Blandly.]* Did you look at the Bronzinos?

TONY: *[Falling into the trap.]* Yes. Arthur Fenwick bought one the other day at Christie's. He paid a devil of a price for it too.

DUCHESS: *[Clenching her hands in the effort to hide her agitation.]* Oh?

TONY: I do think it's rot, the prices people pay for old masters. I'm blowed if I'd give ten thousand pounds for a picture.

DUCHESS: We'll go to the National Gallery together one of these days, shall we?

TONY: I don't know that I want to make a habit of it, you know.

[PEARL and THORNTON CLAY come in. During the conversation the DUCHESS surreptitiously watches PEARL and TONY for signs of an intelligence between them.]

PEARL: I've got great news for you. Bessie and Harry Bleane are engaged.

DUCHESSE: Oh, my dear, I'm so glad. How gratified you must be!

PEARL: Yes, I'm delighted. You must come and congratulate them.

CLAY: Above all we must congratulate one another. We've all worked for it, Pearl.

TONY: He hadn't much chance, poor blighter, had he?

PEARL: We're going to have one more dance, and then Arthur wants to play poker. You must come.

CLAY: [*To the DUCHESSE.*] Will you dance this with me, Minnie?

DUCHESSE: I'd like to.

[*CLAY gives her his arm. She throws TONY and PEARL a glance, and purses her lips. She goes out with CLAY.*]

PEARL: You haven't danced with me yet, Tony. You should really pay some attention to your hostess.

TONY: I say, don't go.

PEARL: Why not?

TONY: Because I want to talk to you.

PEARL: [*Flippantly.*] If you want to whisper soft nothings in my ear, you'll find the one-step exceedingly convenient.

TONY: You're a little beast, Pearl.

PEARL: You've been having a long talk with Minnie.

TONY: Oh, she's been making me a hell of a scene.

PEARL: Poor thing, she can't help it. She adores you.

TONY: I wish she didn't, and you did.

PEARL: [*With a chuckle.*] My dear, it's your only attraction for me that she adores you. Come and dance with me.

TONY: You've got a piece of hair out of place.

PEARL: Have I? [*She takes a small glass out of her bag and looks at herself. As she does so TONY steps behind her and kisses her neck.*] You fool, don't do that. Anyone might see us.

TONY: I don't care.

PEARL: I do. Arthur's as jealous as cats' meat.

TONY: Arthur's playing the pianola.

PEARL: There's nothing wrong with my hair.

TONY: Of course there isn't. You're perfectly divine to-night. I don't know what there is about you.

PEARL: You're a foolish creature, Tony.

TONY: Let's go in the garden.

PEARL: No, they'll be wondering where we are.

TONY: Hang it all, it's not so extraordinary to take a stroll instead of dancing.

PEARL: I don't want to take a stroll.

TONY: Pearl.

PEARL: Yes?

[She looks at him. For a moment they stare at one another in silence. A hot flame of passion leaps up suddenly between them, and envelops them, so that they forget everything but that they are man and woman. The air seems all at once heavy to breathe. PEARL, like a bird in a net, struggles to escape; their voices sink, and unconsciously they speak in whispers.]

PEARL: Don't be a fool, Tony.

TONY: [*Hoarsely.*] Let's go down to the tea-house.

PEARL: No, I won't.

TONY: We shall be quite safe there.

PEARL: I daren't. It's too risky.

TONY: Oh, damn the risk!

PEARL: [*Agitated.*] I can't!

TONY: I'll go down there and wait.

PEARL: [*Breathlessly.*] But—if they wonder where I am.

TONY: They'll think you've gone up to your room.

PEARL: I won't come, Tony.

TONY: I'll wait for you.

[As he goes out, ARTHUR FENWICK comes in. PEARL gives a slight start, but quickly recovers herself.]

FENWICK: Look here, I'm not going on pounding away at that wretched pianola unless you come and dance, Pearl.

PEARL: *[Exhausted.]* I'm tired, I don't want to dance any more.

FENWICK: Poor child, you look quite pale.

PEARL: Do I? I thought I'd put plenty of rouge on. Am I looking revolting?

FENWICK: You always look adorable. You're wonderful. I can't think what you see in an old fellow like me.

PEARL: You're the youngest man I've ever known.

FENWICK: How well you know the thing to say to please me!

[He is just going to take her in his arms, but instinctively she draws back.]

PEARL: Let's play poker now, shall we?

FENWICK: Not if you're tired, darling.

PEARL: I'm never too tired for that.

FENWICK: You don't know how I adore you. It's a privilege to be allowed to love you.

PEARL: *[Sure of herself again.]* Oh, what nonsense! You'll make me vain if you say things like that.

FENWICK: You do love me a little, don't you? I want your love so badly.

PEARL: Why, I dote on you, you silly old thing.

[She takes his face in her hands and kisses him, avoids his arms that seek to encircle her, and goes towards the door.]

FENWICK: Where are you going?

PEARL: I'm just going to my room to arrange my face.

FENWICK: My God, how I love you, girliel There's nothing in the world I wouldn't do for you.

PEARL: Really?

FENWICK: Nothing.

PEARL: Then ring for Pole and tell him to set out the card-table and bring the counters.

FENWICK: And I was prepared to give you a sable coat or a diamond tiara.

PEARL: I much prefer chinchilla and emeralds.

FENWICK: [*Taking her hand.*] Must you really go and arrange your face?

PEARL: Really!

FENWICK: Be quick then. I can hardly bear you out of my sight. [*He kisses her hand.*]

PEARL: [*Looking at him tenderly.*] Dear Arthur.

[*She goes out. FENWICK rings the bell. Then he goes on the terrace and calls out.*]

FENWICK: Thornton, we're going to play poker. Get them to come along, will you?

CLAY: [*Outside.*] Right-ho!

[*POLE comes in.*]

FENWICK: Oh, Pole, get the card-table ready.

POLE: Very good, sir.

FENWICK: And we shall want the counters. Let's have those mother-o'-pearl ones that I brought down last time I was here.

POLE: Very good, sir.

[*The PRINCESS comes in. POLE proceeds to bring a card-table into the centre of the room and unfolds it. He gets a box of counters out of a drawer, and puts them on the table.*]

FENWICK: Pearl has just gone to her room. She'll be here in one minute.

PRINCESS: [*Looking at the preparations.*] This looks like more dissipation.

FENWICK: We were going to have a little game of poker. I don't think we ought to play very long, Pearl is looking terribly tired.

PRINCESS: I don't wonder. She's so energetic.

FENWICK: She does too much. Just now when I came in she was quite white. I'm really very uneasy about her. You see, she never spares herself.

PRINCESS: Fortunately she's extremely strong.

FENWICK: She has a constitution of iron. She's a very wonderful woman. It's very seldom you meet a woman like Pearl. She's got a remarkable brain. I've frequently discussed business with her, and I've been amazed at her clear grasp of complicated matters. I owe a great deal to her. And she's good, Princess, she's good. She's got a heart of gold.

PRINCESS: I'm sure she has.

FENWICK: She'll always do a good turn to anybody. She's the most generous, the most open-handed woman I've ever met.

[The DUCHESS comes in as he says these words.]

DUCHESS: Who is this?

FENWICK: We were talking of our hostess.

DUCHESS: I see.

[She has her bag in her hand; when the others are not looking she hides it behind a sofa.]

FENWICK: I have no hesitation in saying that Pearl is the most remarkable woman in England. Why, she's got half the Cabinet in her pocket. She's very powerful.

DUCHESS: I have often thought that if she'd lived in the reign of Charles II she would have been a duchess in her own right.

FENWICK: [*Innocently.*] Maybe. She would adorn any sphere. She's got everything—tact, brains, energy, beauty.

DUCHESS: Virtue.

FENWICK: If I were the British people, I'd make her Prime Minister.

PRINCESS: [*Smiling.*] You're an excellent friend, Mr. Fenwick.

FENWICK: Of course, you've heard of her hostel for young women alone in London?

DUCHESS: [*Sweetly.*] Yes, there was a great deal about it in the papers, wasn't there?

FENWICK: That's a thing I've always admired in Pearl. She has a thoroughly modern understanding of the value of advertisement.

DUCHESS: Yes, she has, hasn't she?

FENWICK: Well, believe me, she conceived the idea of that hostel, built it, endowed it, organised it, all on her own. It cost twenty thousand pounds.

DUCHESS: But surely, Mr. Fenwick, you paid the twenty thousand pounds. Pearl hasn't got sums like that to throw away on charity.

FENWICK: I gave the money, but the money isn't the important thing. The idea, the organisation, the success, are all due to Pearl.

DUCHESS: It has certainly been one of the best advertised of recent philanthropic schemes.

[THORNTON CLAY, BESSIE, BLEANE and FLEMING come in.]

CLAY: We're all dying to play poker.

FENWICK: The table is ready.

BESSIE: Where is Pearl?

FENWICK: She's gone to her room. She'll be back in a minute.

[*They gather round the table and sit down.*]

BESSIE: You're going to play, Princess?

PRINCESS: Oh, I don't think so, I'll look on. I'm going to bed in a minute.

BESSIE: Oh, you must play.

[The PRINCESS smiles, shrugs her shoulders and approaches the table.]

FENWICK: Leave a place for Pearl.

DUCHESSE: You must leave one for Tony, too.

CLAY: What's he doing?

DUCHESSE: He'll be here presently.

FENWICK: Shall I give out the counters? What would you like to play for?

PRINCESS: Don't let it be too high.

DUCHESSE: How tiresome of you, Flora! I think I'm in luck to-night.

FENWICK: We don't want to ruin anyone. Shilling antes. Will that suit you?

PRINCESS: Very well.

FENWICK: *[To CLAY.]* The whites are a shilling, Thornton, reds two, and blues five bob. Mr. Harvey, you might count some out, will you?

FLEMING: Sure.

[The three of them start counting out the counters.]

DUCHESSE: Oh, how stupid of me, I haven't got my bag.

FENWICK: Never mind, we'll trust you.

DUCHESSE: Oh, I'd rather pay at once. It saves so much bother. Besides, I hate not having my bag.

PRINCESS: One always wants to powder one's nose if one hasn't got it.

DUCHESSE: Bessie dear, I left it in Pearl's new tea-house. Do run and fetch it for me.

BESSIE: Certainly.

BLEANE: No, I'll go.

BESSIE: You don't know the way. I can go through the bushes. It's only twenty yards. You stop and count out the counters.

[She goes out.]

FENWICK: There's five pounds here. Will you take them, Princess?

PRINCESS: Thank you. Here's my money.

DUCHESSE: I'll give you my fiver as soon as Bessie brings my bag.

CLAY: How on earth came you to leave it in the tea-house?

DUCHESSE: I'm so careless. I'm always leaving my bag about.

FLEMING: Here's another five pounds.

PRINCESS: What beautiful counters they are!

FENWICK: I'm glad you like them. I gave them to Pearl. They've got her initials on them.

CLAY: Let's have a hand before Pearl comes. Lowest deals.

[They all cut.]

FLEMING: Table stakes, I suppose?

FENWICK: Oh yes, it makes it a much better game.

CLAY: Your deal, Fenwick.

FENWICK: Ante up, Princess.

PRINCESS: I beg your pardon.

[She pushes forward a counter. FENWICK deals. The others take up their cards.]

FENWICK: Two shillings to come in.

FLEMING: I'm coming in.

BLEANE: I always come in.

FENWICK: I oughtn't to, but I shall all the same. Are you going to make good your ante, Princess?

PRINCESS: I may just as well, mayn't I?

FENWICK: That's how I've made a fortune. By throwing good money after bad. Would you like a card?

PRINCESS: I'll have three.

[FENWICK gives them to her.]

CLAY: The Princess has got a pair of deuces.

FLEMING: I'll have one.

[FENWICK gives it to him.]

BLEANE: One never gets that straight, Harvey. I'll take five.

FENWICK: That's what I call a real sport.

CLAY: Nonsense. It just means he can't play.

BLEANE: It would be rather a sell for you if I got a flush.

CLAY: It would, but you haven't.

[FENWICK has given him cards and BLEANE looks at them.]

BLEANE: You're quite right. I haven't.

[He flings them down. Through the next speeches the business with the cards follows the dialogue.]

FENWICK: Don't you want any cards, Duchesse?

DUCHESS: No, I'm out of it.

CLAY: I'll have three. I thought you were in luck.

DUCHESS: Wait a minute. You'll be surprised.

FENWICK: Dealer takes two.

CLAY: Who bets?

PRINCESS: I'm out of it.

CLAY: I said it was a pair of deuces.

FLEMING: I'll bet five shillings.

CLAY: I'll take it and raise five shillings.

FENWICK: I suppose I must risk my money. What have I got to put down? Ten shillings?

FLEMING: There's five shillings, and I'll raise you five shillings more.

CLAY: No, I've had enough.

FENWICK: I'll take you and raise you again.

FLEMING: Very well. And once more.

FENWICK: I'll see you.

[BESSIE comes in. *The DUCHESS* has been watching for her. BESSIE is excessively disturbed.

DUCHESSE: Ah, there's Bessie.

FENWICK: [To FLEMING.] What have you got?

DUCHESSE: Did you find my bag?

BESSIE: [With a gasp.] No, it wasn't there.

DUCHESSE: Oh, but I remember distinctly leaving it there. I'll go and look for it myself. Mr. Fenwick, will you come with me.

BESSIE: No, don't—you can't go into the tea-house.

PRINCESS: [Surprised.] Bessie, is anything the matter?

BESSIE: [In a strained voice.] The door of the tea-house is locked.

DUCHESSE: Oh, it can't be. I saw Pearl and Tony go in there just now.

[BESSIE suddenly hides her face and bursts into a flood of tears.

PRINCESS: [Starting to her feet.] Minnie, you devill What have you been doing?

DUCHESSE: Don't ask what I've been doing.

FENWICK: You must be mistaken. Pearl went up to her room.

DUCHESSE: Go and look for her. . . .

[FENWICK is about to start from his chair. The PRINCESS puts her hand on his shoulders.

PRINCESS: Where are you going?

DUCHESSE: I saw her.

[For a moment there is a pause.

CLAY: [In an embarrassed way.] Well, we'd better go on with our game, hadn't we?

[*The PRINCESS and BLEANE are bending over BESSIE, trying to get her to control herself.*]

FLEMING: That was your money, Mr. Fenwick.

FENWICK: [*Staring in front of him, with a red face and blood-shot eyes, under his breath.*] The slut. The slut.

[*The DUCHESS takes her bag from behind the cushion, gets out the stick for her lips, and her mirror, and begins to paint them.*]

CLAY: You'd better deal, Fleming. The Princess won't play, I expect.

DUCHESSE: Deal me cards. I want to play.

CLAY: Bleane, come on. We'd better go on with our game. Take Bessie's chips.

[*BLEANE comes forward. FLEMING deals the cards. A stormy silence hangs over the party, broken only by the short speeches referring to the game; they play trying to relieve the tension. They are all anxiously awaiting PEARL, afraid she will come, knowing she must, and dreading the moment; they are nervous and constrained.*]

CLAY: Your ante, Bleane.

[*BLEANE puts forward a counter. The cards are dealt in silence.*]

CLAY: I'm coming in.

[*FENWICK looks at his cards, puts forward a couple of counters, but does not speak. FLEMING puts forward counters.*]

FLEMING: D'you want a card?

BLEANE: Three, please.

CLAY: Two.

FENWICK: [*With an effort over himself.*] I'll have three.

[*FLEMING deals them as they ask. Just as he has given FENWICK his, PEARL comes in, followed by TONY. TONY is smoking a cigarette.*]

PEARL: Oh, have you started already?

FENWICK: [*Violently.*] Where have you been?

PEARL: I? My head was aching a little and I went for a turn in the garden. I found Tony composing a sonnet to the moon.

FENWICK: You said you were going to your room.

PEARL: What are you talking about?

[She looks round, sees the DUCHESSE's look of angry triumph, and gives a slight start.]

DUCHESSE: Once too often, my dear, once too often.

[PEARL takes no notice. She sees BESSIE. BESSIE has been staring at her with miserable eyes, and now she bides her face. PEARL realises that everything is discovered. She turns coolly to TONY.]

PEARL: You damned fool, I told you it was too risky.

END OF THE SECOND ACT

THE THIRD ACT

The SCENE is the same as in the last act, the morning-room at Kenton.

It is next day, Sunday, about three in the afternoon, and the sun is shining brightly.

The PRINCESS, THORNTON CLAY and FLEMING are sitting down. FLEMING lights another cigarette.

PRINCESS: Is it good for you to smoke so many cigarettes?

FLEMING: I shouldn't think so.

CLAY: He must do something.

PRINCESS: Perhaps you can get up a game of tennis later on.

FLEMING: It's very hot for tennis.

CLAY: Besides, who will play?

PRINCESS: You two could have a single.

CLAY: If we only had the Sunday papers it would be something.

PRINCESS: You can hardly expect them in a place like this. I don't suppose there are many trains on Sunday.

CLAY: I wonder if dinner is going to be as cheerful as luncheon was.

FLEMING: Did Pearl send any explanation for not appearing at luncheon?

PRINCESS: I haven't an idea.

CLAY: I asked the butler where she was. He said she was lunching in bed. I wish I'd thought of that.

PRINCESS: I'm afraid we were rather silent.

CLAY: Silent! I shall never forget that luncheon. Minnie subdued—and silent. Tony sulky—and silent. Bessie

frightened—and silent. Bleanc embarrassed—and silent. Fenwick furious—and silent. I tried to be pleasant and chatty. It was like engaging the pyramids in small-talk. Both of you behaved very badly. You might have given me a little encouragement.

FLEMING: I was afraid of saying the wrong thing. The Duchesse and Bessie looked as if they'd burst into tears on the smallest provocation.

PRINCESS: I was thinking of Pearl. What a humiliation! What a horrible humiliation!

FLEMING: What d'you think she'll do now?

CLAY: That's what I'm asking myself. I have an idea that she won't appear again till we're all gone.

PRINCESS: I hope she won't. She's always so sure of herself, I couldn't bear to see her pale and mortified.

CLAY: She's got plenty of courage.

PRINCESS: I know. She may force herself to face us. It would be a dreadful ordeal for all of us.

FLEMING: D'you think she's feeling it very much?

PRINCESS: She wouldn't be human if she weren't. I don't suppose she slept any better last night than the rest of us. Poor thing, she must be a wreck.

FLEMING: It was a terrible scene.

PRINCESS: I shall never forget it. The things that Minnie said. I couldn't have believed such language could issue from a woman's throat. Oh, it was horrible.

CLAY: It was startling. I've never seen a woman so beside herself. And there was no stopping her.

FLEMING: And with Bessie there.

PRINCESS: She was crying so much, I doubt if she heard.

CLAY: I was thankful when Minnie had the hysterics and we were able to fuss over her and dab her face and slap her hands. It was a very welcome diversion.

FLEMING: Does she have attacks like that often?

CLAY: I know she did when the young man before Tony married an heiress. I think she has one whenever there's a crisis in the affairs of her heart.

FLEMING: For goodness' sake, Thornton, don't talk about it as if it were a joke.

CLAY: [*Surprised.*] What's the matter, Fleming?

FLEMING: I think it's abominable to treat the whole thing so flippantly.

CLAY: Why, I was very sympathetic. I wasn't flippant. Who got the sal volatile? I got the sal volatile.

FLEMING: [*With a shrug of the shoulders.*] I daresay my nerves are a bit on edge. You see, before, I only thought things were rather queer. It's come as, well, as a shock to discover exactly what the relations are between all these people. And what I can't very easily get over is to realise that I'm the only member of the party who doesn't take it as a matter of course.

CLAY: We shall never make a man of the world of you, Fleming.

FLEMING: I'm afraid that didn't sound very polite, Princess. I beg your pardon.

PRINCESS: I should have few friends if I demanded the standard that you do. I've learned not to judge my neighbours.

FLEMING: Is it necessary to condone their vices?

PRINCESS: You don't understand. It's not entirely their fault. It's the life they lead. They've got too much money and too few responsibilities. English women in our station have duties that are part of their birthright, but we, strangers in a strange land, have nothing to do but enjoy ourselves.

FLEMING: Well, I thank God Bleane is a decent man, and he'll take Bessie out of all this.

[*The DUCHESS comes in. Unlike the PRINCESS, who is in a summer frock, suitable for the country, the DUCHESS wears a town dress and a hat.*

PRINCESS: You've been changing your frock, Minnie.

DUCHESS: Yes. I'm leaving this house in half an hour. I'd have gone this morning, if I'd been able to get away. I always thought it a detestable hole, but now that I've discovered there are only two trains on Sunday, one at nine, and the other at half-past four, I have no words to express my opinion of it.

CLAY: Yet you have an extensive vocabulary, Minnie.

DUCHESS: I've been just as much a prisoner as if I'd been shut up with lock and key. I've been forced to eat that woman's food. I thought every mouthful would choke me.

PRINCESS: Do keep calm, Minnie. You know how bad it is for you to upset yourself.

DUCHESS: As soon as I found there wasn't a train I sent over to the garage and said I wanted to be taken to London at once. Would you believe it, I couldn't get a car.

CLAY: Why not?

DUCHESS: One of the cars went up to town early this morning, and the other is being overhauled. There's nothing but a luggage cart. I couldn't go to London in a luggage cart. As it is I shall have to go to the station in it. I shall look ridiculous.

CLAY: Have you ordered it?

DUCHESS: Yes. It's to be round at the door in a few minutes.

CLAY: What on earth can Pearl have sent the car up to London for?

DUCHESS: To show her spite.

PRINCESS: That's not like her.

DUCHESS: My dear, she's been my greatest friend for fifteen years. I know her through and through, and I tell you that she hasn't got a single redeeming quality. And why does she want to have the car overhauled to-day? When you're giving a party the least you can do is to see that your cars are in running order.

PRINCESS: Oh, well, that was an accident. You can't blame her for that.

DUCHESS: I only have one thing to be thankful for, and that is that she has had the decency to keep to her room. I will be just. It shows at least that she has some sense of shame.

CLAY: You know, Minnie, Pearl has a good heart. She didn't mean to cause you pain.

DUCHESS: Are you trying to excuse her, Thornton?

CLAY: No, I think her conduct is inexcusable.

DUCHESS: So do I. I mean to have nothing more to do with her. It's a judgment on me. I disliked her the first time I saw her. One should always trust one's first impressions. Now my eyes are opened. I will never speak to her again. I will cut her dead. I hope you'll tell her that, Thornton.

CLAY: If that's a commission you're giving me, it's not a very pleasant one.

PRINCESS: Will you let me have a word or two with Minnie?

CLAY: Why, of course. Come along, Fleming.

[CLAY and FLEMING HARVEY go into the garden.]

DUCHESS: My dear, if you're going to ask me to turn the other cheek, don't. Because I'm not going to. I'm going to do all I can to revenge myself on that woman. I'm going to expose her. I'm going to tell everyone how she's treated me. When I was her guest.

PRINCESS: You must take care what you say for your own sake, Minnie.

DUCHESS: I know quite enough about her to make her position in London impossible. I'm going to ruin her.

PRINCESS: What about Tony?

DUCHESS: Oh, I've finished with him. Ah! I'm not the kind of woman to stand that sort of treatment. I hope he'll end in the gutter.

PRINCESS: Don't you care for him any more?

DUCHESS: My dear, if he was starving, and went down on his bended knees to me for a piece of bread, I wouldn't give it to him. He revolts me.

PRINCESS: Well, I'm very glad. It distressed me to see you on those terms with a boy like that. You're well rid of him.

DUCHESS: My dear, you needn't tell me that. He's a thorough wrong 'un, and that's all there is about it. He hasn't even had the decency to try and excuse himself. He hasn't even made an attempt to see me.

PRINCESS: [*Gives her a quick look.*] After all, he never really cared for you. Anyone could see that.

DUCHESS: [*Her voice breaking.*] Oh, don't say that, Flora. I couldn't bear it. He loved me. Until that woman came between us I know he loved me. He couldn't help loving me. I did everything in the world for him. [*She bursts into tears.*]

PRINCESS: Minnie. My dear, don't give way. You know what a worthless creature he is. Haven't you any self-respect?

DUCHESS: He's the only man I've ever loved. I could hardly bear him out of my sight. What shall I do without him?

PRINCESS: Take care, here he is.

[*TONY comes in. He is startled at seeing the DUCHESS. She turns away and hurriedly dries her tears.*]

TONY: Oh, I beg your pardon. I didn't know anyone was here. I was looking for some cigarettes.

[He stands there awkwardly, not knowing whether to go or stay. The PRINCESS looks at him reflectively. There is a moment's silence. Then she shrugs her shoulders and goes out. He looks at the DUCHESS who stands with her back to him. He hesitates a moment, then, almost on the tips of his toes, walks over to the cigarettes, fills his case, takes another look at the DUCHESS, and is in the act of tip-toeing out of the room when she stops him with her question.]

DUCHESS: Where are you going?

TONY: Nowhere in particular.

DUCHESS: Then you'd better stay here.

TONY: I thought you wished to be alone.

DUCHESS: Is that why you've kept away from me all day?

[He sinks sulkily into an armchair. The DUCHESS finally turns round and faces him.]

DUCHESS: Haven't you got anything to say for yourself at all?

TONY: What's the good of talking?

DUCHESS: You might at least say you're sorry for the pain you've caused me. If you'd had any affection for me you wouldn't have done all you could to avoid me.

TONY: I knew you'd only make a scene.

DUCHESS: Good heavens, you surely don't expect me not to make a scene.

TONY: The whole thing's very unfortunate.

DUCHESS: Ha! Unfortunate. You break my heart and then you say it's unfortunate.

TONY: I didn't mean that. I meant it was unfortunate that you caught us out.

DUCHESS: Oh, hold your stupid tongue. Every word you say is more unfortunate than the last.

TONY: It's because I knew you'd take offence at everything I said that I thought the best thing I could do was to keep out of the way.

DUCHESS: You're heartless, heartless. If you'd had any decent feeling you couldn't have eaten the lunch you did. But you munched away, munched, munched, munched, till I could have killed you.

TONY: Well, I was hungry.

DUCHESS: You oughtn't to have been hungry.

TONY: What are you going to do about it?

DUCHESS: About your appetite? Pray to God your next mouthful chokes you.

TONY: No, about the other.

DUCHESS: I'm going to leave this house this afternoon.

TONY: D'you want me to come, too?

DUCHESS: What d'you suppose it matters to me whether you go or stay?

TONY: If you go I shall have to go, too.

DUCHESS: You ought to start soon then. It's four miles to the station. I shall be obliged if you will not get in the same carriage as me.

TONY: I'm not going to walk. They can run me down in a car.

DUCHESS: There's nothing but a luggage cart, and I'm going in that.

TONY: Isn't there room for me?

DUCHESS: No.

TONY: When d'you want me to move out of my flat?

DUCHESS: What has that got to do with me?

TONY: You know very well that I can't pay the rent.

DUCESSE: That's your look-out.

TONY: I shall go to the colonies.

DUCESSE: That's the very best thing you can do. I hope you'll have to break stones, and dig, and paint—with lead paint. I hope you're miserable.

TONY: Oh, well, it'll have its compensations.

DUCESSE: Such as?

TONY: I shall be my own master. I was about fed up with this, I can tell you.

DUCESSE: Yes, you can say that now.

TONY: D'you think it was all jam, never being able to call my soul my own? I was sick to death of it.

DUCESSE: You cad!

TONY: Well, you may just as well know the truth.

DUCESSE: D'you mean to say you never cared for me? Not even at the beginning?

[He shrugs his shoulders, but does not answer. She speaks the next phrases in little gasps gradually weakening as her emotion overcomes her. He stands before her in sulky silence.]

DUCESSE: Tony, I've done everything in the world for you. I've been like a mother to you. How *can* you be so ungrateful. You haven't got any heart. If you had you'd have asked me to forgive you. You'd have made some attempt to . . . Don't you *want* me to forgive you?

TONY: What d'you mean by that?

DUCESSE: If you'd only asked me, if you'd only shown you were sorry, I'd have been angry with you, I wouldn't have spoken to you for a week, but I'd have forgiven you—I'd have forgiven you, Tony. But you never gave me a chance. It's cruel of you, cruel!

TONY: Well, anyhow, it's too late now.

DUCESSE: Do you want it to be too late?

TONY: It's no good grouching about the past. The thing's over now.

DUCESSE: Aren't you sorry?

TONY: I don't know. I suppose I am in a way. I don't want to make you unhappy.

DUCESSE: If you wanted to be unfaithful to me, why didn't you prevent me from finding out? You didn't even trouble to take a little precaution.

TONY: I was a damned fool, I know that.

DUCESSE: Are you in love with that woman?

TONY: No.

DUCESSE: Then why did you? Oh, Tony, how could you?

TONY: If one felt about things at night as one does next morning, life would be a dashed sight easier.

DUCESSE: If I said to you, Let's let bygones be bygones and start afresh, what would you say, Tony?

[She looks away. He rests his eyes on her reflectively.]

TONY: We've made a break now. We'd better leave it at that. I shall go out to the colonies.

DUCESSE: Tony, you don't mean that seriously. You could never stand it. You know, you're not strong. You'll only die.

TONY: Oh, well, one can only die once.

DUCESSE: I'm sorry for all I said just now, Tony. I didn't mean it.

TONY: It doesn't matter.

DUCESSE: I can't live without you, Tony.

TONY: I've made up my mind. It's no good talking.

DUCESSE: I'm sorry I was horrid to you, Tony. I'll never be again. Won't you forget it? Oh, Tony, won't you forgive me? I'll do anything in the world for you if only you won't leave me.

TONY: It's a rotten position I'm in. I must think of the future.

DUCESSE: Oh, but Tony, I'll make it all right for you.

TONY: It's very kind of you, but it's not good enough. Let's part good friends, Minnie. If I've got to walk to the station, it's about time I was starting. [*He holds out his hand to her.*]

DUCESSE: D'you mean to say it's good-bye? Good-bye for ever? Oh, how can you be so cruel!

TONY: When one's made up one's mind to do a thing, it's best to do it at once.

DUCESSE: Oh, I can't bear it. I can't bear it. [*She begins to cry.*] Oh, what a fool I was! I ought to have pretended not to see anything. I wish I'd never known. Then you wouldn't have thought of leaving me.

TONY: Come, my dear, pull yourself together. You'll get over it.

DUCESSE: [*Desperately.*] Tony, if you want to marry me—I'm willing to marry you. [*A pause.*]

TONY: I should be just as dependent on you. D'you think it would be jolly for me having to come to you for every five pounds I wanted?

DUCESSE: I'll settle something on you so that you'll be independent. A thousand a year. Will that do?

TONY: You are a good sort, Minnie. [*He goes over and sits down beside her.*]

DUCESSE: You will be kind to me, won't you?

TONY: Rather! And look here, you needn't give me that two-seater. I shall be able to drive the Rolls-Royce.

DUCESSE: You didn't want to go to the colonies, did you?

TONY: Not much.

DUCESSE: Oh, Tony, I do love you so.

TONY: That's right.

DUCHESSE: We won't stay another minute in this house. Ring the bell, will you? You'll come with me in the luggage cart?

TONY: [*Touching the bell.*] I much prefer that to walking.

DUCHESSE: It's monstrous that there shouldn't be a motor to take luggage to the station. It's a most uncomfortable house to stay in.

TONY: Oh, beastly. D'you know that I didn't have a bathroom attached to my bedroom? [*POLE comes in.*]

DUCHESSE: Is the luggage cart ready, Pole?

POLE: I'll enquire, your grace.

DUCHESSE: My maid is to follow in the morning with the luggage. Mr. Paxton will come with me. [*To TONY.*] What about your things?

TONY: Oh, they'll be all right. I brought my man with me.

POLE: Her ladyship is just coming downstairs, your grace.

DUCHESSE: Oh, is she? Thank you, that'll do, Pole.

POLE: Very good, your grace.

[*He goes out. As soon as he closes the door behind him the DUCHESSE springs to her feet.*]

DUCHESSE: I won't see her. Tony, see if Thornton is on the terrace.

TONY: All right. [*He goes to the French window.*] Yes. I'll call him, shall I? Clay, come here a minute, will you?

[*He goes out. THORNTON CLAY comes in, followed immediately by the PRINCESS and FLEMING.*]

DUCHESSE: Thornton, I'm told Pearl is coming downstairs.

CLAY: At last.

DUCHESSE: I won't see her. Nothing will induce me to see her.

PRINCESS: My dear, what is to be done? We can't make her remain upstairs in her own house.

DUCHESS: No, but Thornton can speak to her. She's evidently ashamed of herself. I only ask one thing, that she should keep out of the way till I'm gone.

CLAY: I'll do my best.

DUCHESS: I'm going to walk up and down till the luggage cart is ready. I haven't taken my exercise to-day.

[She goes out.]

CLAY: If Pearl is in a temper that's not a very pleasant message to give her.

PRINCESS: You won't find her in a temper. If she's dreadfully upset, tell her what Minnie says gently.

FLEMING: Here is Bessie. *[She comes in.]* It appears that Pearl is just coming downstairs.

BESSIE: Is she?

PRINCESS: Have you seen her this morning, Bessie?

BESSIE: No. She sent her maid to ask me to go to her, but I had a headache and couldn't.

[They look at her curiously. She is inclined to be abrupt and silent. It may be imagined that she has made up her mind to some course, but what that is the others cannot tell. FLEMING goes over and sits beside her.]

FLEMING: I'm thinking of going back to America next Saturday, Bessie.

BESSIE: Dear Fleming, I shall be sorry to lose you.

FLEMING: I expect you'll be too busy to think about me. You'll have to see all kinds of people, and then there's your trousseau to get.

BESSIE: I wish you could come over to Paris with me, Princess, and help me with it.

PRINCESS: I? *[She gets an inkling of what BESSIE means.]* Of course, if I could be of any help to you, dear child. . . .
[She takes BESSIE's hand and gives her a fond smile. BESSIE

turns away to hide a tear that for a moment obscures her eyes.]
Perhaps it's a very good idea. We must talk about it.

[PEARL comes in. She is perfectly cool and collected. radiant in a wonderful, audacious gown; she is looking her best and knows it. There is nothing in her manner to indicate the smallest recollection of the episode that took place on the preceding evening.]

PEARL: [Brightly.] Good-morning.

CLAY: Good-afternoon.

PEARL: I knew everyone would abuse me for coming down so late. It was such a lovely day I thought it was a pity to get up.

CLAY: Don't be paradoxical, Pearl, it's too hot.

PEARL: The sun streamed into my room, and I said, It's a sin not to get up on a morning like this. And the more I said I ought to get up, the more delightful I found it to lie in bed. How is your head, Bessie?

BESSIE: Oh, it's better, thank you.

PEARL: I was sorry to hear you weren't feeling up to the mark.

BESSIE: I didn't sleep very well.

PEARL: What have you done with your young man?

BESSIE: Harry? He's writing letters.

PEARL: Spreading the glad tidings, I suppose. You ought to write to his mother, Bessie. It would be a graceful attention. A charming, frank little letter, the sort of thing one would expect an *ingénue* to write. Straight from the heart.

CLAY: I'm sure you'd love to write it yourself, Pearl.

PEARL: And we must think about sending an announcement to the Morning Post.

FLEMING: You think of everything, Pearl.

PEARL: I take my duties as Bessie's chaperon very seriously.

I've already got a brilliant idea for the gown I'm going to wear at the wedding.

FLEMING: Gee!

PEARL: My dear Fleming, don't say Gee, it's so American. Say By Jove.

FLEMING: I couldn't without laughing.

PEARL: Laffing. Why can't you say laughing?

FLEMING: I don't want to.

PEARL: How obstinate you are. Of course, now that Bessie is going to marry an Englishman she'll have to take lessons. I know an excellent woman. She's taught all the American peeresses.

FLEMING: You surprise me.

PEARL: She's got a wonderful method. She makes you read aloud. And she has long lists of words that you have to repeat twenty times a day—half instead of haf, and barth instead of bath, and carnt instead of can't.

FLEMING: By Jove instead of Gee?

PEARL: Peeresses don't say By Jove, Fleming. She teaches them to say Good heavens instead of Mercy.

FLEMING: Does she make money by it?

PEARL: Pots. She's a lovely woman. Eleo Dorset had an accent that you could cut with a knife when she first came over, and in three months she hadn't got any more than I have.

BESSIE: [*Getting up. To FLEMING.*] D'you think it's too hot for a turn in the garden?

FLEMING: Why, no.

BESSIE: Shall we go then? [*They go out together*]

PEARL: What's the matter with Bessie? She must have swallowed a poker last night. No wonder she couldn't sleep. It's enough to give anyone indigestion.

CLAY: You know that Minnie is going this afternoon, Pearl?

PEARL: Yes, so I heard. It's such a bore there are no cars to take her to the station. She'll have to go in the luggage cart.

CLAY: She doesn't wish to see you.

PEARL: Oh, but I wish to see her.

CLAY: I daresay.

PEARL: I must see her.

CLAY: She asked me to tell you that she only wished you to do one thing, and that is to keep out of the way till she's gone.

PEARL: Then you can go and tell her that unless she sees me she shan't have the luggage cart.

CLAY: Pearl!

PEARL: That's my ultimatum.

CLAY: Can you see me taking a message like that to the Duchesse?

PEARL: It's four miles to the station, and there's not a scrap of shade all the way.

CLAY: After all, it's not a very unreasonable request she's making.

PEARL: If she wants the luggage cart she must come and say good-bye to me like a lady.

CLAY: [*To the PRINCESS.*] What am I to do? We used up all the sal volatile last night.

PRINCESS: I'll tell her if you like. D'you really insist on seeing her, Pearl?

PEARL: Yes, it's very important. [*The PRINCESS goes out. PEARL watches her go with a smile.*] I'm afraid Flora is shocked. She shouldn't know such people.

CLAY: Really, Pearl, your behaviour is monstrous.

PEARL: Never mind about my behaviour. Tell me how luncheon went off.

CLAY: My dear, it was like a gathering of relations who hate one another, after the funeral of a rich aunt who's left all her money to charity.

PEARL: It must have been priceless. I'd have given anything to be there.

CLAY: Why weren't you?

PEARL: Oh, I knew there'd be scenes, and I'm never at my best in a scene before luncheon. One of the things I've learnt from the war is that a general should choose his own time for a battle.

CLAY: Minnie moved heaven and earth to get away this morning.

PEARL: I knew she couldn't. I knew none of them could go till the afternoon.

CLAY: The train service is atrocious.

PEARL: George says that is one of the advantages of the place. It keeps it rural. There's one at nine and another at half-past four. I knew that not even the most violent disturbances would get people up at eight who never by any chance have breakfast till ten. As soon as I awoke I took the necessary steps.

CLAY: [*Interrupting.*] You slept?

PEARL: Oh yes, I slept beautifully. There's nothing like a little excitement to give me a good night.

CLAY: Well, you certainly had some excitement. I've rarely witnessed such a terrific scene.

PEARL: I sent out to the garage and gave instructions that the old Rolls-Royce was to be taken down at once and the other was to go to London.

CLAY: What for?

PEARL: Never mind. You'll know presently. Then I did a little telephoning.

CLAY: Why were you so anxious to prevent anybody from leaving the house?

PEARL: I couldn't have persuaded myself that my party was a success if half my guests had left me on Sunday morning. I thought they might change their minds by the afternoon.

CLAY: If that's your only reason, I don't think it's a very good one.

PEARL: It isn't. I will be frank with you, Thornton. I can imagine that a very amusing story might be made out of this episode. I never mind scandal, but I don't expose myself to ridicule if I can help it.

CLAY: My dear Pearl, surely you can trust the discretion of your guests. Who do you think will give it away?

PEARL: You.

CLAY: I? My dear Pearl, I give you my word of honour . . .

PEARL: [*Calmly.*] My dear Thornton, I don't care two-pence about your word of honour. You're a professional entertainer, and you'll sacrifice everything to a good story. Why, don't you remember that killing story about your father's death? You dined out a whole season on it.

CLAY: Well, it was a perfectly killing story. No one would have enjoyed it more than my poor old father.

PEARL: I'm not going to risk anything, Thornton. I think it's much better there should be no story to tell.

CLAY: No one can move the clock backwards, Pearl. I couldn't help thinking at luncheon that there were the elements of a very good story indeed.

PEARL: And you'll tell it, Thornton. Then I shall say: My dear, does it sound probable? They all stayed quite happily till Monday morning; Sturrey and the Arlingtons dined on the Sunday night, and we had a very merry evening. Besides, I was lunching with Minnie only two days afterwards. And I shall say: Poor Thornton, he is such a liar, isn't he?

CLAY: I confess that if you are reconciled with Minnie it will take a great deal of the point away from my story. What about Arthur Fenwick?

PEARL: He's a sensualist, and the sensual are always sentimental.

CLAY: He scared me dreadfully at luncheon. He was eating a dressed crab, and his face grew every minute more purple. I was expecting him to have an apoplectic fit.

PEARL: It's not an unpleasant death, you know, Thornton, to have a stroke while you're eating your favourite dish.

CLAY: You know, there are no excuses for you, Pearl.

PEARL: Human nature excuses so much, Thornton.

CLAY: You really might have left Tony alone. This habit you have of snitching has got you into trouble before.

PEARL: People are so selfish. It just happens that I find no man so desirable as one that a friend of mine is in love with. I make allowances for the idiosyncrasies of my friends. Why shouldn't they make allowances for mine?

[*The DUCHESS comes in, erect and haughty, with the air of Boadicea facing the Roman legions. PEARL turns to her with an ingratiating smile.*]

PEARL: Ah, Minnie.

DUCHESS: I'm told the only way I can leave this house is by submitting to the odious necessity of seeing you.

PEARL: I wish you wouldn't go, Minnie. Lord Sturrey is coming over to dinner to-night, and so are the Arlingtons. I always take a lot of trouble to get the right people together, and I hate it when anybody fails me at the last minute.

DUCHESS: D'you think anything would have induced me to stay so long if there'd been any possibility of getting away?

PEARL: It wouldn't have been nice to go without saying good-bye to me.

DUCHESS: Don't talk nonsense, Pearl.

PEARL: D'you know that you behaved very badly last night, and I ought to be extremely angry with you?

DUCHESS: I? Thornton, the woman's as mad as a hatter.

PEARL: You really oughtn't to have made a scene before Harry Bleane. And, you know, to tell Arthur wasn't playing the game. If you wanted to tell anyone, why didn't you tell George?

DUCHESS: In the first place, he wasn't here. He never is.

PEARL: I know. He says that now society has taken to coming down to the country for week-ends he prefers London.

DUCHESS: I'll never forgive you. Never. Never. Never. You'd got Arthur Fenwick. Why weren't you satisfied with him? If you wanted to have an affair with anyone, why didn't you take Thornton? He's almost the only one of your friends with whom you haven't. The omission is becoming almost marked.

PEARL: Thornton never makes love to me except when other people are looking. He can be very passionate in the front seat of my box at the opera.

CLAY: This conversation is growing excessively personal. I'll leave you. *[He goes out.]*

PEARL: I'm sorry I had to insist on your seeing me, but I had something quite important to say to you.

DUCHESS: Before you go any further, Pearl, I wish to tell you that I'm going to marry Tony.

PEARL: *[Aghast.]* Minnie! Oh, my dear, you're not doing it to spite me? You know, honestly, he doesn't interest me in the slightest. Oh, Minnie, do think carefully.

DUCHESS: It's the only way I can keep him.

PEARL: D'you think you'll be happy?

DUCHESS: What should you care if I'm happy?

PEARL: Of course I care. D'you think it's wise? You're giving yourself into his hands. Oh, my dear, how can you risk it?

DUCHESS: He said he was going out to the colonies. I love him. . . . I believe you're really distressed. How strange you are, Pearl! Perhaps it's the best thing for me. He may settle down. I was very lonely sometimes, you know. Sometimes, when I had the blues, I almost wished I'd never left home.

PEARL: And I've been moving heaven and earth to get him a job. I've been on the telephone this morning to all the Cabinet Ministers I know, and at last I've done it. That's what I wanted to tell you. I thought you'd be so pleased. I suppose now he won't want it.

DUCHESS: Oh, I'm sure he will. He's very proud, you know. That's one of the things I liked in him. He had to be dependent on me, and that's partly why he always wanted to marry me.

PEARL: Of course, you'll keep your title.

DUCHESS: Oh yes, I shall do that.

PEARL: [*Going towards her as if to kiss her.*] Well, darling, you have my very, very best wishes.

DUCHESS: [*Drawing back.*] I'm not going to forgive you, Pearl.

PEARL: But you've forgiven Tony.

DUCHESS: I don't blame him. He was led away.

PEARL: Come, Minnie, don't be spiteful. You might let by-gones be by-gones.

DUCHESS: Nothing will induce me to stay in this house another night.

PEARL: It's a very slow train, and you'll have to go without your tea.

DUCHESS: I don't care.

PEARL: You won't arrive in London till half-past eight, and you'll have to dine in a restaurant.

DUCHESS: I don't care.

PEARL: You'll be grubby and hot. Tony will be hungry and out of temper. And you'll look your age.

DUCHESS: You promised me the luggage cart.

PEARL: [*With a sigh.*] You shall have it; but you'll have to sit on the floor, because it hasn't got any seats.

DUCHESS: Pearl, it's not going to break down on the way to the station?

PEARL: Oh, no. How can you suspect me of playing a trick like that on you? . . . [*With a tinge of regret.*] It never occurred to me.

[THORNTON CLAY *comes in.*

CLAY: Pearl, I thought you'd like to know that Fenwick is coming to say good-bye to you.

DUCHESS: I'll go and tell Tony about the job you've got him. By the way, what is it?

PEARL: Oh, it's something in the Education Office.

DUCHESS: How very nice. What do they do there?

PEARL: Nothing. But it'll keep him busy from ten to four.

[*The DUCHESS goes out.*]

PEARL: She's going to marry him.

CLAY: I know.

PEARL: I'm a wonderful matchmaker. First Bessie and Harry Bleane, and now Minnie and Tony Paxton. I shall have to find someone for you, Thornton.

CLAY: How on earth did you manage to appease her?

PEARL: I reasoned with her. After all, she should be glad the boy has sown his wild oats before he marries. And besides, if he were her husband, of course she wouldn't

expect fidelity from him; it seems unnatural to expect it when he isn't.

CLAY: But she's going all the same.

PEARL: I've got a quarter of an hour yet. Give me your handkerchief, will you?

CLAY: [*Handing it to her.*] You're not going to burst into tears?

PEARL: [*She rubs her cheeks violently.*] I thought I ought to look a little wan and pale when Arthur comes in.

CLAY: You'll never love me, Pearl. You tell me all your secrets.

PEARL: Shall I tell you what to do about it? Take the advice I give to Americans who come over to London and want to see the Tower: say you've been, and don't go.

CLAY: D'you think you can bring Arthur round?

PEARL: I'm sure I could if he loved me.

CLAY: My dear, he dotes on you.

PEARL: Don't be a fool, Thornton. He loves his love for me. That's quite a different thing. I've only got one chance. He sees himself as the man of iron. I'm going to play the dear little thing racket.

CLAY: You're a most unscrupulous woman, Pearl.

PEARL: Not more than most. Please go. I think he ought to find me alone.

[CLAY goes out. PEARL seats herself in a pensive attitude and looks down at the carpet; in her hand she holds dejectedly an open volume of poetry. Presently ARTHUR FENWICK comes in. She pretends not to see him. He is the strong man, battered but not beaten, struggling with the emotion which he tries to master.]

FENWICK: Pearl!

PEARL: [*With a jump.*] Oh, how you startled me. I didn't hear you come in.

FENWICK: I daresay you're surprised to see me. I thought it was necessary that we should have a short conversation before I left this house.

PEARL: [*Looking away.*] I'm glad to see you once more.

FENWICK: You understand that everything is over between us.

PEARL: If you've made up your mind, there's nothing for me to say. I know that nothing can move you when you've once done that.

FENWICK: [*Drawing himself up a little.*] No. That has always been part of my power.

PEARL: I wouldn't have you otherwise.

FENWICK: I don't want to part from you in anger, Pearl. Last night I could have thrashed you within an inch of your life.

PEARL: Why didn't you? D'you think I'd have minded that from the man I loved?

FENWICK: You know I could never hit a woman.

PEARL: I thought of you all through the long hours of the night, Arthur.

FENWICK: I never slept a wink.

PEARL: One would never think it. You must be made of iron.

FENWICK: I think I am sometimes.

PEARL: Am I very pale?

FENWICK: A little.

PEARL: I feel a perfect wreck.

FENWICK: You must go and lie down. It's no good making yourself ill.

PEARL: Oh, don't bother about me, Arthur.

FENWICK: I've bothered about you so long. It's difficult for me to get out of the habit all at once.

PEARL: Every word you say stabs me to the heart.

FENWICK: I'll get done quickly with what I had to tell you and then go. It's merely this. Of course, I shall continue the allowance I've always made you.

PEARL: Oh, I couldn't take it. I couldn't take it.

FENWICK: You must be reasonable, Pearl. This is a matter of business.

PEARL: It's a question I refuse to discuss. Nothing would have induced me to accept your help if I hadn't loved you. Now that there can be nothing more between us—no, no, the thought outrages me.

FENWICK: I was afraid that you'd take up that attitude. Remember that you've only got eight thousand a year of your own. You can't live on that.

PEARL: I can starve.

FENWICK: I must insist, Pearl, for my own sake. You've adopted a style of living which you would never have done if you hadn't had me at the back of you. I'm morally responsible, and I must meet my obligations.

PEARL: We can only be friends in future, Arthur.

FENWICK: I haven't often asked you to do anything for me, Pearl.

PEARL: I shall return your presents. Let me give you my pearl necklace at once.

FENWICK: Girlie, you wouldn't do that.

PEARL: [*Pretending to try and take the necklace off.*] I can't undo the clasp. Please help me.

[*She goes up to him and turns her back so that he may get at it.*]

FENWICK: I won't. I won't.

PEARL: I'll tear it off my neck.

FENWICK: Pearl, you break my heart. Do you care for me so little that you can't bear to wear the trifling presents I gave you.

PEARL: If you talk to me like that I shall cry. Don't you see that I'm trying to keep my self-control?

FENWICK: This is dreadful. This is even more painful than I anticipated.

PEARL: You see, strength is easy to you. I'm weak. That's why I put myself in your hands. I felt your power instinctively.

FENWICK: I know, I know, and it was because I felt you needed me that I loved you. I wanted to shelter you from the storms and buffets of the world.

PEARL: Why didn't you save me from myself, Arthur?

FENWICK: When I look at your poor, pale little face I wonder what you'll do without me, girlie.

PEARL: [*Her voice breaking.*] It'll be very hard. I've grown so used to depending on you. Whenever anything has gone wrong, I've come to you and you've put it right. I was beginning to think there was nothing you couldn't do.

FENWICK: I've always welcomed obstacles. I like something to surmount. It excites me.

PEARL: You seemed to take all my strength from me. I felt strangely weak beside you.

FENWICK: It wasn't necessary that we should both be strong. I loved you because you were weak. I liked you to come to me in all your troubles. It made me feel so good to be able to put everything right for you.

PEARL: You've always been able to do the impossible.

FENWICK: [*Impressively.*] I have never found anything impossible.

PEARL: [*Deeply moved.*] Except to forgive.

FENWICK: Ah, I see you know me. I never forget. I never forgive.

PEARL: I suppose that's why people feel there's something strangely Napoleonic about you.

FENWICK: Maybe. And yet—though you're only a woman, you've broken me, Pearl, you've broken me.

PEARL: Oh no, don't say that. I couldn't bear that. I want you to go on being strong and ruthless.

FENWICK: Something has gone out of my life for ever. I almost think you've broken my heart. I was so proud of you. I took so much pleasure in your success. Why, whenever I saw your name in the society columns of the papers it used to give me a thrill of satisfaction. What's going to become of you now, girlie? What's going to become of you now?

PEARL: I don't know; I don't care.

FENWICK: This fellow, does he care for you? Will he make you happy?

PEARL: Tony? He's going to marry the Duchesse. [FENWICK *represses a start.*] I shall never see him again.

FENWICK: Then if I leave you, you'll have nobody but your husband.

PEARL: Nobody.

FENWICK: You'll be terribly lonely, girlie.

PEARL: You will think of me sometimes, Arthur, won't you?

FENWICK: I shall never forget you, girlie. I shall never forget how you used to leave your fine house in Mayfair and come and lunch with me down town.

PEARL: You used to give me such delicious things to eat.

FENWICK: It was a treat to see you in your beautiful clothes sharing a steak with me and a bottle of beer. I can order a steak, Pearl, can't I?

PEARL: And d'you remember those delicious little onions that we used to have? [*She seems to taste them.*] M . . . M . . . M . . . It makes my mouth water to think of them.

FENWICK: There are few women who enjoy food as much as you do, Pearl.

PEARL: D'you know, next time you dined with me, I'd made up my mind to give you an entirely English dinner. Scotch broth, herrings, mixed grill, saddle of lamb, and then enormous marrow bones.

[FENWICK *can hardly bear the thought, his face grows red, his eyes bulge, and he gasps.*

FENWICK: Oh, girlie! [*With utter abandonment.*] Let's have that dinner. [*He seizes her in his arms and kisses her.*] I can't leave you. You need me too much.

PEARL: Arthur, Arthur, can you forgive me?

FENWICK: To err is human, to forgive divine.

PEARL: Oh, how like you that is!

FENWICK: If you must deceive me, don't let me ever find out. I love you too much.

PEARL: I won't, Arthur, I promise you I won't.

FENWICK: Come and sit on the sofa and let me look at you. I seem to see you for the first time.

PEARL: You know, you wouldn't have liked the walk to the station. It's four miles in the sun. You're a vain old thing, and your boots are always a little too small for you.

[BESSIE *comes in. She stops as she sees PEARL and FENWICK sitting hand in hand.*

PEARL: Are you going out, Bessie?

BESSIE: As soon as Harry has finished his letters, we're going for a walk.

PEARL: [*To FENWICK.*] You mustn't squeeze my hand in Bessie's presence, Arthur.

FENWICK: You're a very lucky girl, Bessie, to have a sister like Pearl. She's the most wonderful woman in the world.

PEARL: You're talking nonsense, Arthur. Go and put some flannels on. It makes me quite hot to look at you in that suit. We'll try and get up a little tennis after tea.

FENWICK: Now, you mustn't tire yourself, Pearl. Remember those white cheeks of yours.

PEARL: [*With a charming look at him.*] Oh, I shall soon get my colour back now.

[*She gives him her hand to kiss and he goes out. PEARL takes a little mirror out of her bag and looks at herself reflectively.*]

PEARL: Men are very trivial, foolish creatures. They have kind hearts. But their heads. Oh dear, oh dear, it's lamentable. And they're so vain, poor dears, they're so vain.

BESSIE: Pearl, to-morrow, when we go back to London, I'm going away.

PEARL: Are you? Where?

BESSIE: The Princess is going to take me over to Paris for a few days.

PEARL: Oh, is that all? Don't stay away too long. You ought to be in London just at present.

BESSIE: On my return I'm proposing to stay with the Princess.

PEARL: [*Calmly.*] Nonsense.

BESSIE: I wasn't asking your permission, Pearl. I was telling you my plans.

PEARL: [*Looks at her for a moment reflectively.*] Are you going to make me a scene, too? I've already gone through two this afternoon. I'm rather tired of them.

BESSIE: Please don't be alarmed. I've got nothing more to say.

[*She makes as though to leave the room.*]

PEARL: Don't be a little fool, Bessie. You've been staying with me all the season. I can't allow you to leave my

house and go and live with Flora. We don't want to go out of our way to make people gossip.

BESSIE: Please don't argue with me, Pearl. It's not my business to reproach you for anything you do. But it isn't my business, either, to stand by and watch.

PEARL: You're no longer a child, Bessie.

BESSIE: I've been blind and foolish. Because I was happy and having a good time, I never stopped to ask for explanations of this, that and the other. I never thought. . . . The life was so gay and brilliant—it never struck me that underneath it all—— Oh, Pearl, don't make me say what I have in my heart, but let me go quietly.

PEARL: Bessie, dear, you must be reasonable. Think what people would say if you suddenly left my house. They'd ask all sorts of questions, and heaven knows what explanations they'd invent. People aren't charitable, you know. I don't want to be hard on you, but I can't afford to let you do a thing like that.

BESSIE: Now that I know what I do, I should never respect myself again if I stayed.

PEARL: I don't know how you can be so unkind.

BESSIE: I don't want to be that, Pearl. But it's stronger than I am. I must go.

PEARL: [*With emotion.*] I'm so fond of you, Bessie. You don't know how much I want you with me. After all, I've seen so little of you these last few years. It's been such a comfort to me to have you. You were so pretty and young and sweet, it was like a ray of April sunshine in the house.

BESSIE: I'm afraid you think women are as trivial, foolish creatures as men, Pearl.

[PEARL looks up and sees that BESSIE is not in the least taken in by the pathetic attitude.]

PEARL: [*Itily.*] Take care you don't go too far, Bessie.

BESSIE: There's no need for us to quarrel. I've made up my mind, and there's the end of it.

PEARL: Flora's a fool. I shall tell her that I won't have her take you away from me. You'll stay with me until you're married.

BESSIE: D'you want me to tell you that I can hardly bear to speak to you? You fill me with shame and disgust. I want never to see you again.

PEARL: Really, you drive me beyond endurance. I think I must be the most patient woman in the world to put up with all I've had to put up with to-day. After all, what have I done? I was a little silly and incautious. By the fuss you all make one would think no one had ever been incautious and silly before. Besides, it hasn't got anything to do with you. Why don't you mind your own business?

BESSIE: [*Bitterly.*] You talk as though your relations with Arthur Fenwick were perfectly natural.

PEARL: Good heavens, you're not going to pretend you didn't know about Arthur. After all, I'm no worse than anybody else. Why, one of the reasons we Americans like London is that we can live our own lives and people accept things philosophically. Elco Gloster, Sadie Twickenham, Maimie Hartlepool—you don't imagine they're faithful to their husbands? They didn't marry them for that.

BESSIE: Oh, Pearl, how can you? How can you? Haven't you any sense of decency at all? When I came in just now and saw you sitting on the sofa with that gross, vulgar, sensual old man—oh! [*She makes a gesture of disgust.*] You can't love him. I could have understood if . . . but—oh, it's so disgraceful, it's so hideous. What can you see in him? He's nothing but rich. . . . [*She pauses, and her face changes as a thought comes to her, and coming borries her.*] It's not because he's rich? Pearl! Oh!

PEARL: Really, Bessie, you're very silly, and I'm tired of talking to you.

BESSIE: Pearl, it's not that? Answer me. Answer me.

PEARL: [*Roughly.*] Mind your own business.

BESSIE: He was right, then, last night, when he called you that. He was so right that you didn't even notice it. A few hours later you're sitting hand in hand with him. A slut. That's what he called you. A slut. A slut.

PEARL: How dare you! Hold your tongue. How dare you!

BESSIE: A kept woman. That's what you are.

PEARL: [*Recovering herself.*] I'm a fool to lose my temper with you.

BESSIE: Why should you? I'm saying nothing but the truth.

PEARL: You're a silly little person, Bessie. If Arthur helps me a little, that's his affair, and mine. He's got more money than he knows what to do with, and it amuses him to see me spend it. I could have twenty thousand a year from him if I chose.

BESSIE: Haven't you got money of your own?

PEARL: You know exactly what I've got. Eight thousand a year. D'you think I could have got the position I have on that? You're not under the impression all the world comes to my house because of my charm, are you? I'm not. You don't think the English want us here? You don't think they like us marrying their men? Good heavens, when you've known England as long as I have you'll realise that in their hearts they still look upon us as savages and Red Indians. We have to force ourselves upon them. They come to me because I amuse them. Very early in my career I discovered that the English can never resist getting something for nothing. If a dancer is the rage, they'll see her at my house. If a fiddler is in vogue, they'll hear him at my concert.

I give them balls. I give them dinners. I've made myself the fashion, I've got power, I've got influence. But everything I've got—my success, my reputation, my notoriety—I've bought it, bought it, bought it.

BESSIE: How humiliating!

PEARL: And, finally, I've bought you a husband.

BESSIE: That's not true. He loves me.

PEARL: D'you think he'd have loved you if I hadn't shown you to him in these surroundings, if I hadn't dazzled him by the brilliant people among whom he found you. You don't know what love is made of. D'you think it's nothing that he should hear a Prime Minister pay you compliments. Of course I bought him.

BESSIE: [*Aghast.*] It's horrible.

PEARL: You know the truth now. It'll be very useful to you in your married life. Run away and take your little walk with Harry Bleane. I'm going to arrange my face.

[*She goes out. BESSIE is left ashamed and stunned. BLEANE comes in.*]

BLEANE: I'm afraid I've kept you waiting. I'm so sorry.

BESSIE: [*Dully.*] It doesn't matter at all.

BLEANE: Where shall we go? You know the way about these parts, and I don't.

BESSIE: Harry, I want you to release me. I can't marry you.

BLEANE: [*Aghast.*] Why?

BESSIE: I want to go back to America. I'm frightened.

BLEANE: Of me?

BESSIE: Oh no, I know that you're a dear, good creature; I'm frightened of what I may become.

BLEANE: But I love you, Bessie.

BESSIE: Then that's all the more reason for me to go. I must tell you frankly. I'm not in love with you, I only

like you. I would never have dreamt of marrying you, if you hadn't been who you are. I wanted to have a title. That's why Pearl married her husband, and that's why the Duchess married. Let me go, Harry.

BLEANE: I knew you didn't love me, but I thought you might come to in time. I thought if I tried I could make you love me.

BESSIE: You didn't know that I was nothing but a self-seeking, heartless snob.

BLEANE: I don't care what you say of yourself, I know that you can be nothing but what is true and charming.

BESSIE: After what you've seen last night? After what you know of this house? Aren't you disgusted with all of us?

BLEANE: You can't think I could class you with the Duchesse and . . . [*He stops.*]

BESSIE: Pearl at my age was no different from what I am. It's the life.

BLEANE: But perhaps you won't want to lead it. The set you've been living in here isn't the only set in England. It makes a stir because it's in the public eye. Its doings are announced in the papers. But it isn't a very good set, and there are plenty of people who don't very much admire it.

BESSIE: You must let me try and say what I have in my heart. And be patient with me. You think I can make myself at home in your life. I've had a hint of it now and then. I've seen a glimpse of it through Pearl's laughter and the Duchesse's sneers. It's a life of dignity, of responsibilities, and of public duty.

BLEANE: [*With a rueful smile.*] You make it very strenuous.

BESSIE: It comes naturally to the English girls of your class. They've known it all their lives, and they've been brought up to lead it. But we haven't. To us it's just tedious,

and its dignity is irksome. We're bored, and we fall back on the only thing that offers, pleasure. You've spoken to me about your house. It means everything to you because it's associated with your childhood and all your people before you. It could only mean something to me if I loved you. And I don't.

BLEANE: You've made me so wretched. I don't know what to say to you.

BESSIE: If I make you wretched now, it's so that we may both be saved a great deal of unhappiness later on. I'm glad I don't care for you, for it would make it so much harder for me to go. And I've got to go. I can't marry you. I want to go home. If I marry ever I want to marry in my own country. That is my place.

BLEANE: Don't you think you could wait a little before you decide finally?

BESSIE: Don't put difficulties in my way. Don't you see that we're not strong enough for the life over here? It goes to our head; we lose our bearings; we put away our own code, and we can't adopt the code of the country we come to. We drift. There's nothing for us to do but amuse ourselves, and we fall to pieces. But in America we're safe. And perhaps America wants us. When we come over here we're like soldiers deserting our country in time of war. Oh, I'm homesick for America. I didn't know how much it meant to me till now. Let me go back, Harry.

BLEANE: If you don't want to marry me, of course, I'm not going to try and make you.

BESSIE: Don't be angry, and be my friend always.

BLEANE: Always.

BESSIE: After all, three months ago you didn't know me. In three months more you will have forgotten me. Then marry some English girl, who can live your life and share your thoughts. And be happy.

[PEARL comes in. *She has rouged her cheeks, and has once more the healthy colour which is usual with her. She is evidently jubilant.*

PEARL: The car has just come back from London. [*She goes to the french window and calls.*] Minnie!

BESSIE: I shall tell Pearl to-morrow.

BLEANE: I won't post my letters then. I'll go and get them out of the box.

BESSIE: Forgive me.

[*He goes out. The DUCHESSE and CLAY appear at the window.*

DUCHESSE: Did you call me?

PEARL: The car has just come back from London, so it can take you to the station.

DUCHESSE: That's a mercy. I didn't at all like the idea of going to the station in the luggage cart. Where is Flora? I must say good-bye to her.

PEARL: Oh, there's plenty of time now. The car will run you down in ten minutes.

[*TONY comes in, then the PRINCESS and FLEMING.*

DUCHESSE: Tony, the car has returned, and is going to take us to the station.

TONY: Thank God for that! I should have looked a perfect fool in that luggage cart.

CLAY: But what on earth did you send the car to London for, anyway?

PEARL: In one minute you'll see.

[*ARTHUR FENWICK comes in. He has changed into flannels.*

FENWICK: Who is that gentleman that's just arrived, Pearl?

PEARL: The man of mystery.

[*The BUTLER comes in, followed by ERNEST, and after announcing him goes out.*

POLE: Mr. Ernest.

DUCHESS: Ernest!

CLAY: Ernest?

[He is a little dark man, with large eyes, and long hair neatly plastered down. He is dressed like a tailor's dummy, in black coat, white gloves, silk hat, patent leather boots. He is a dancing master, and overwhelmingly gentlemanly. He speaks in mincing tones.]

ERNEST: Dear Lady Grayston.

PEARL: *[Shaking hands with him.]* I'm so glad you were able to come. *[To the others.]* You were talking about Ernest last night, and I thought we would have nothing to do this evening and he would cheer and comfort us. I sent the car up to London with orders to bring him back dead or alive.

ERNEST: My dear Lady Grayston, I'm sure I'll get into no end of trouble. I had all sorts of calls to pay this afternoon, and I was dining out, and I'd promised to go to a little hop that the dear Duchess of Gloster was giving. But I felt I couldn't refuse *you*. You've always been such a good friend to me, dear Lady Grayston. You must excuse me coming in my town clothes, but your chauffeur said there wasn't a moment to lose, so I came just as I am.

PEARL: But you look a perfect picture.

ERNEST: Oh, don't say that, dear Lady Grayston; I know this isn't the sort of thing one ought to wear in the country.

PEARL: You remember the Duchesse de Surennes?

ERNEST: Oh, of course I remember the Duchesse.

DUCHESS: Dear Ernest!

ERNEST: Dear Duchess!

DUCHESS: I thought I was never going to see you again, Ernest.

ERNEST: Oh, don't say that, it sounds too sad.

PEARL: It's such a pity you must go, Minnie. Ernest could have shown you all sorts of new steps.

ERNEST: Oh, dear Duchesse, you're not going the very moment I come down? That is unkind of you.

DUCHESS: [*With an effort.*] I must go. I must go.

ERNEST: Have you been practising that little step I showed you the other day? My dear friend, the Marchioness of Twickenham—not the *old* one, you know, the *new* one—is beginning to do it so well.

DUCHESS: [*Struggling with herself.*] Have we time, Pearl? I should like Ernest to dance just one two-step with me.

PEARL: Of course there's time. Thornton, set the gramophone.

[THORNTON CLAY *at once starts it, and the notes of the two-step tinkle out.*

DUCHESS: You don't mind, Ernest, do you?

ERNEST: I love dancing with you, Duchesse.

[*They take up their positions.*

DUCHESS: Just one moment. It always makes me so nervous to dance with you, Ernest.

ERNEST: Oh, now, don't be silly, dear Duchesse.

[*They begin to dance.*

ERNEST: Now hold your shoulders like a lady. Arch your back, my dear, arch your back. Don't look like a sack of potatoes. If you put your foot there, I shall kick it.

DUCHESS: Oh, Ernest, don't be cross with me.

ERNEST: I shall be cross with you, Duchesse. You don't pay any attention to what I say. You must give your mind to it.

DUCHESS: I do! I do!

ERNEST: And don't dance like an old fish-wife. Put some vim into it. That's what I always say about these modern dances: you want two things, vim and nous.

DUCHESS: [*Plaintively.*] Ernest!

ERNEST: Now don't cry. I'm saying all this for your good, you know. What's wrong with you is that you've got no passion.

DUCHESS: Oh, Ernest, how can you say such a thing. I've always looked upon myself as a very passionate woman.

ERNEST: I don't know anything about that, dear Duchesse, but you don't get it into your dancing. That's what I said the other day to the dear Marchioness of Twickenham—not the *new* one, you know, the *old* one—You must put passion into it, I said. That's what these modern dances want—passion, passion.

DUCHESS: I see exactly what you mean, Ernest.

ERNEST: And you must dance with your eyes as well, you know. You must look as if you had a knife in your garter, and as if you'd kill me if I looked at another woman. Don't you see how I'm looking, I'm looking as though I meant, Curse her! how I love her. There!

[*The music stops and they separate.*]

DUCHESS: I have improved, Ernest, haven't I?

ERNEST: Yes, you've improved, dear Duchesse, but you want more practice.

PEARL: Minnie, why on earth don't you stay, and Ernest will give you a real lesson this evening.

ERNEST: That's what you want, Duchess.

[*The DUCHESS wrestles with her soul.*]

DUCHESS: Tony, d'you think we can stop?

TONY: I didn't want to go away. It's rotten going up to town this evening. What on earth are we going to do with ourselves when we get there?

DUCHESS: Very well, Pearl, if it'll please you, we'll stop.

PEARL: That is nice of you, Minnie.

DUCHESS: You're very naughty sometimes, Pearl, but you have a good heart, and I can't help being fond of you.

PEARL: [*With outstretched arms.*] Minnie!

DUCHESS: Pearl!

[They clasp one another and affectionately embrace.]

ERNEST: What an exquisite spectacle—two ladies of title kissing one another.

BESSIE: [*To FLEMING.*] They're not worth making a fuss about. I'm sailing for America next Saturday!

THE END

THE UNATTAINABLE

A FARCE

in Three Acts

CHARACTERS

CAROLINE ASHLEY
ISABELLA TRENCH
MAUDE FULTON
COOPER
ROBERT OLDHAM
REX CUNNINGHAM
DR. CORNISH

The action takes place during the morning and afternoon of one day in the drawing-room of Caroline's house in Regent's Park.

THE UNATTAINABLE

THE FIRST ACT

SCENE: *The drawing-room of CAROLINE's house in Regent's Park. It is spacious and airy. It is furnished in a pleasantly fantastic manner by a woman who desires to be in the latest mode, but who tempers it with her own good taste. The influence of futurism is apparent in the carpet, the cushions, the coverings of sofas and chairs; but there is nothing so outrageous as to make the room merely a curiosity. Here and there large jars of flowers contrast the sobriety of nature with the extravagance of human imagination.*

It is early summer and late in the morning.

COOPER, a trim parlourmaid, ushers in MRS. TRENCH.

ISABELLA TRENCH is a woman of thirty-five, fair, plump, pretty still, well dressed and debonair. She has an attractive softness and a great gift of sympathy. Her heart melts to every unhappiness, and people in distress go to her instinctively.

COOPER: I'll tell Mrs. Ashley you're here, madam.

ISABELLA: She's not down yet?

COOPER: No, madam, she's only just had her bath.

ISABELLA: Do ask her if I can come up. I want to see her at once.

COOPER: Very good, madam.

ISABELLA: Tell her I'm frightfully excited.

COOPER: Very good, madam.

ISABELLA: [*With a smile.*] Of course you know, Cooper?

COOPER: Oh, yes, madam; it was cook saw it first. She

always likes to have a look at The Times before it goes upstairs.

ISABELLA: Was Mrs. Ashley surprised.

COOPER: Well, madam, she never said a word. She just kept staring at the announcement. As I said to cook, I really thought her eyes would pop out of her head.

ISABELLA: I must see her at once, Cooper.

COOPER: I'll go and tell her, madam. [*As she is going the telephone bell rings. COOPER answers it.*] Yes—who is it, please? No, miss, this is Mrs. Ashley's maid speaking. [*To ISABELLA.*] It's Miss Fulton, madam.

ISABELLA: Oh, let me speak to her. I think I know what she wants. Go and tell Mrs. Ashley I'm here.

COOPER: Very good, madam.

[*Exit. ISABELLA sits down and takes the receiver.*]

ISABELLA: Maude, Maudel! It's Isabella Trench speaking. I rang you up this morning, and they said you hadn't come up from the country. I have not seen Caroline yet. I know no more than you do, darling. I think it must be true. After all, it's in The Times. Why don't you come round? I'm sure Caroline will want to see you. Yes, that's it. You'll find me here. Good-bye.

[*She puts down the receiver. COOPER ushers in REX CUNNINGHAM. He is a nice-looking young man with dark eyes, and dark hair brushed back over his head and plastered down. He achieves a romantic look, notwithstanding his motor-coat and the cap that he carries in his hand.*]

COOPER: Mr. Cunningham.

[*REX hesitates a moment as he sees a stranger in the room, then recognizes ISABELLA and comes forward cordially. ISABELLA greets him without warmth.*]

REX: How do you do?

COOPER: Mrs. Ashley will be down directly, madam.

ISABELLA: Very well.

[Exit COOPER.]

REX: [Looking at his wrist watch.] She promised she'd be ready on the minute.

ISABELLA: What for?

REX: I've got a new two-seater. I'm going to take her for a turn round Richmond Park.

ISABELLA: When did you make that arrangement?

REX: Last night.

[She looks at him for a moment puzzled.]

ISABELLA: Haven't you heard the news?

REX: What news?

ISABELLA: Why, there's an announcement in The Times this morning of Stephen Ashley's death.

REX: My hat! . . . Ought one to condole with Caroline or congratulate her?

ISABELLA: I didn't know you called her Caroline.

REX: Didn't you?

ISABELLA: She hasn't seen her husband for over ten years. One can hardly expect her to be very much upset. Still, I don't think she'll want to go for a run in your two-seater.

REX: Why not?

ISABELLA: She'll have other things to do.

REX: Was her husband an awful brute?

ISABELLA: I don't know anything about him. Caroline never discusses her relations with him. I don't believe there's one of her friends who's ever seen him even.

REX: I asked her once if he was cruel to her. She said no, he had adenoids.

ISABELLA: You seem to be on very intimate terms with Caroline.

REX: Do you disapprove?

ISABELLA: Very much.

REX: What shall we do about it?

ISABELLA: D'you know that Robert Oldham and Caroline have been madly in love with one another for the last ten years? It has given me a new faith in human nature to watch their charming affection for one another. They've waited all this time, and now at last Caroline is free. I'm so glad to think they have nothing to reproach themselves with. It's the happy ending to a fairy story.

REX: [*Dejectedly.*] I suppose you think the only thing I can do is to take myself off.

ISABELLA: Robert may be here any minute.

REX: I was looking forward enormously to our drive.

ISABELLA: Are you in love with Caroline?

REX: Desperately.

ISABELLA: [*Putting her hand on his arm.*] I'm so sorry. You must try and get over it.

REX: I shall never do that.

ISABELLA: But you knew about Robert.

REX: He's forty-five if he's a day. No man can be seriously in love at that age.

ISABELLA: Caroline oughtn't to have let you come here. She must have known that you cared for her.

REX: She told me she was in love with Robert Oldham.

ISABELLA: [*More and more sympathetic.*] Are you awfully unhappy?

REX: Awfully. Do you think there's no chance for me at all?

ISABELLA: It would be cruel to hold out any hopes to you. None—none whatever.

REX: [*Sombrely.*] My hat!

ISABELLA: Now you must go.

REX: All right. If you think I'd better. You've been awfully kind to me.

ISABELLA: I've got such a soft heart and you've touched it.

REX: May I call you Isabella?

ISABELLA: I'd like you to.

[She gives him her hand. He raises it to his lips and kisses it.]

ISABELLA: I'm such a sentimentalist. Love always moves me.

REX: Good-bye.

[Exit. ISABELLA wipes the tiny tears that glisten in the corner of her eyes. CAROLINE comes in. She is a very attractive woman of thirty-five, tall, slim, with humorous eyes and a charming smile. She is dressed for motoring.]

ISABELLA: Carolinel

CAROLINE: Have I kept you waiting?

ISABELLA: Why didn't you let me come up? I wanted to see you so badly.

CAROLINE: I don't let even my dearest friend see me till I've done my hair.

ISABELLA: I suppose you don't like your forehead?

CAROLINE: Not much. By the way, where is Rex? I saw his car from my window.

ISABELLA: I thought you wouldn't want to see him this morning. I sent him away.

CAROLINE: Why on earth did you do that?

ISABELLA: My dear, do you know he's in love with you?

CAROLINE: I should be a perfect fool if I didn't.

ISABELLA: He hasn't told you so?

CAROLINE: I'm beginning to think it's his only topic of conversation.

ISABELLA: My dear, how can you be so flippant?

CAROLINE: D'you think I ought to take him seriously?

ISABELLA: [*Not without acidity.*] Of course, he's very young, I don't suppose he means half he says.

CAROLINE: [*Chaffing her.*] Even if he means a quarter it's a good deal.

ISABELLA: D'you think he wants to marry you?

CAROLINE: I don't know. I'm sure he wants to elope with me.

ISABELLA: You're too exasperating, Caroline. But I didn't come here to talk about Rex.

CAROLINE: D'you call him Rex?

ISABELLA: He asked me to just now.

CAROLINE: [*Smiling.*] Oh!

ISABELLA: Now, Caroline, be serious. *Is it true?* When I read the births, deaths, and marriages in The Times this morning, and suddenly saw your name, I could hardly believe my eyes.

CAROLINE: Neither could I. "On the 29th ult., at the Edward and Alexandra Hospital, Nairobi, Stephen, only son of the late Algernon Ashley of Bleane Woods, Faversham, aged 41. By Cable."

ISABELLA: It must be true.

CAROLINE: Of course, it's very circumstantial, but Stephen had a peculiar sense of humour. He's been reported dead two or three times. It's true, it's never got so far as the obituary column of The Times before.

ISABELLA: Can't you make certain?

CAROLINE: I telephoned to my solicitors and they've cabled to Nairobi. Somehow I think it is true this time.

ISABELLA: Shall you go into mourning?

CAROLINE: I don't see why I should.

ISABELLA: I wouldn't unless you think it'll become you.

CAROLINE: After all, I haven't seen or heard of my husband for more than ten years. It would be hypocrisy to pretend that I regret his death.

ISABELLA: I never knew exactly why you separated from him.

CAROLINE: Oh, he had adenoids.

ISABELLA: [*Smiling.*] You are the most reserved person I ever met.

CAROLINE: I managed not to discuss his failings while he was alive. I think I may just as well hold my tongue about them now he's dead.

ISABELLA: Ah, well, whatever you suffered it's all over now. You've only got happiness to look forward to. Oh, my dear, marry Robert quickly. Don't let there be any delays. Heaven knows you've waited long enough.

CAROLINE: Ten years.

ISABELLA: Aren't you glad now that you have nothing to reproach yourselves with? I know, I'm very glad for you.

CAROLINE: There was never any possibility of anything else. Of course, we might have bolted, but Robert has practised too long in the Divorce Court to fancy the rôle of co-respondent. Besides, he had nothing but his practice to live upon. And we were too fond of one another to risk the infinite tediousness of an affair.

ISABELLA: Everyone must admire your strength.

CAROLINE: It didn't require strength, only common sense.

ISABELLA: Have you heard from him this morning?

CAROLINE: No, I knew he had to be in chambers early.

ISABELLA: He's certain to come round presently.

CAROLINE: I shouldn't think so. He's in a case that's first on the list.

ISABELLA: Aren't you excited? I wonder how you can bear your impatience.

CAROLINE: I can hardly expect Robert to throw up a case to come and propose to me, can I?

[COOPER enters to announce MAUDE FULTON. *She is a smartly-dressed spinster not far off forty, with bright eyes and a vivacious manner. She has a sharp tongue. She is sentimental when other people are concerned, but exceedingly practical in her own affairs.*

COOPER: Miss Fulton.

[Exit.

MAUDE: Oh, my dear, I've had a success. I've been followed in the street.

CAROLINE: [*Amused, greeting her.*] Maudel!

MAUDE: I was rushing along here, when suddenly I realized that a man was following me. Well, I wanted to make sure, so I crossed to the other side of the street, and he crossed too. I slackened down. . . . I was simply running along, I was so anxious to see you and dear Robert—and *he* slackened down.

ISABELLA: Weren't you frightened?

MAUDE: Frightened? Of course not. I'm constantly being followed in the street. I like it. It gives an amusement to the dullest walk. Of course, it never goes any further.

CAROLINE: Do you say that with relief or with regret?

MAUDE: Oh, my dear, I should never have a moment to myself if I listened to all the men who want to make love to me. Of course, I cannot make out what it is they see in me. I know I'm not beautiful, but there's evidently something about me that they can't resist.

CAROLINE: [*Chaffing her.*] I expect it is that you throw yourself at their heads. I never knew a man yet who could resist that.

MAUDE: Oh, my dear, I quite forgot. My best congratulations.

CAROLINE: On the death of my husband?

MAUDE: And on your engagement to Robert Oldham.

CAROLINE: It's very kind of you, but I'm not engaged to Robert Oldham.

MAUDE: Oh, nonsense; that follows automatically on the death of your husband, like putting a penny in the slot and getting a piece of chocolate out. I suppose he's running along to Somerset House now to get a special licence.

CAROLINE: My dear, don't be ridiculous. He hasn't asked me to marry him.

ISABELLA: But he's going to.

CAROLINE: [*Thoughtfully.*] I suppose he is.

MAUDE: What on earth d'you mean, Caroline? You know he is.

CAROLINE: [*With exasperation.*] Yes, of course I do. But don't badger me. You talk as if we had to marry if we liked it or not. I'm not going to force the man to marry me.

MAUDE: Oh, my dear, don't talk such nonsense. He's been passionately in love with you for years.

CAROLINE: For years!

ISABELLA: And you've been just as much in love with him, Caroline.

CAROLINE: I know I have.

MAUDE: You've both been looking forward to this moment even since you met one another?

CAROLINE: And now it's come.

ISABELLA: What a funny thing to say, Caroline.

CAROLINE: It's the obvious thing to say, isn't it? I'm getting into training for married life.

ISABELLA: How strange you are this morning. I expected to find you, oh, I scarcely know—tremulous, crying a little, perhaps. . . .

CAROLINE: [*With a smile.*] I suppose you were prepared to mingle your tears with mine.

ISABELLA: Happy tears. I certainly didn't expect to find you . . .

CAROLINE: What?

MAUDE: In a beastly temper, my dear.

ISABELLA: Be nice to Robert when he comes, Caroline. Think how he must be hating that stupid case which is keeping him away. Don't you know what his thoughts are? I do. He's counting the minutes—why, I can almost hear the beating of his heart.

CAROLINE: What nonsense you talk, Isabella.

ISABELLA: Can't you see him, when he gets here at last, ringing the bell? And the time seems interminable till Cooper opens the door. And then he'll run up the stairs four at a time.

CAROLINE: It's just like a penny novelette, isn't it? But he won't, because it would make him out of breath.

ISABELLA: As if he'll think of that, you foolish creature. He'll just take you in his arms and say: At last, at last—I see it all.

MAUDE: I'd love to be here. I adore romance.

CAROLINE: I shall be greatly obliged if you'll both of you go away before he comes.

ISABELLA: Of course, darling. There are moments when one has a right to be rid of prying eyes.

MAUDE: When did he say he was coming?

CAROLINE: He hasn't said. I've not heard from him this morning.

MAUDE: D'you mean to say he didn't telephone? I wonder why not.

CAROLINE: Perhaps he hadn't time to look at the paper. He may not know.

MAUDE: Oh, nonsense.

ISABELLA: I think it's very natural he shouldn't have telephoned. After all, Stephen Ashley *was* your husband. Robert is a man of the greatest delicacy. It may easily have occurred to him that just at that moment you might have certain memories that you preferred to be left alone with.

CAROLINE: How long do you give his delicacy?

MAUDE: Till the court rises, personally.

ISABELLA: [*Smiling.*] I believe you're just as impatient as I know he is.

CAROLINE: My dear, when you've been staying at the seaside, haven't you sometimes gone down to the beach meaning to have a bathe, and when you got there found the sea look very chilly? You try not to notice it. You go into your bathing machine, and it's grey and comfortless. But you take off your clothes and put on your bathing dress, and then you open the door. You see in front of you a narrow bit of sea. And it's cold and yellow and dreary and wet. And your heart sinks.

MAUDE: The only thing then is not to think about it, but to jump in quickly.

CAROLINE: I'm wondering if that is what Robert is saying to himself just now.

ISABELLA: What on earth makes you think that?

CAROLINE: It's a very good plan to ascribe your own feelings to other people.

MAUDE: My dear, you don't mean to say you're frightened?

CAROLINE: [*Desperately.*] Panic-stricken.

ISABELLA: How foolish you are, Caroline! You don't mean to say you have any doubt about Robert's devotion?

MAUDE: Oh, is *that* what's troubling you?

ISABELLA: Why, everyone knows he adores you. Don't you know how he speaks about you to your friends? I remember, last New Year's Eve when we were having supper together at the Savoy, I said to him: Doesn't it make you rather melancholy to think that another year is gone? No, he said, every New Year that comes brings me nearer to marrying Caroline.

CAROLINE: He's a dear old thing. Of course, I know he loves me.

MAUDE: We have inspired love, you and I, Caroline.

CAROLINE: But your adorers don't put a pistol to your head and say: Marry me.

MAUDE: No, but they frequently put one to their own and say they'll shoot themselves if I don't.

CAROLINE: You're still a spinster, Maude, how do you meet the situation?

MAUDE: I tell them the truth. After mature consideration I have come to the conclusion that one husband is not enough for one woman.

CAROLINE: Good heavens, I found one much more than I wanted.

MAUDE: That doesn't prove that you might not have found three more satisfactory.

ISABELLA: Threel

MAUDE: That is my ideal. I would live two days a week with each and have my Sundays to myself.

[The telephone bell rings.]

ISABELLA: That is Robert.

CAROLINE: It can't be. He must be in court just now.

[She goes towards the telephone. It keeps on ringing.]

ISABELLA: I have a presentiment. I'm convinced it's Robert.

[Just as CAROLINE is about to take the receiver she hesitates; she is very nervous.]

CAROLINE: Answer for me, Maude, in case . . .

MAUDE: Very well.

[She takes up the receiver and listens.]

CAROLINE: I hate telephones. I wish I'd never had one put in.

MAUDE: Who is that? No. This is Miss Fulton speaking, but I'll call Mrs. Ashley—yes, I'll hold on.

CAROLINE: Maude, who is it?

MAUDE: *[Significantly.]* Mr. Oldham's clerk.

CAROLINE: *[Agitated.]* Maude, say I can't speak to anybody. Say I'm out. Say you don't know when I'll be in.

MAUDE: *[Into the receiver.]* Is that you, Robert? This is Maud Fulton. Caroline is here. Yes, she'll be delighted to see you.

CAROLINE: Maude, I'm out. I'm out, I tell you. Say you've made a mistake. Maude, you cat!

MAUDE: *[Taking no notice.]* Yes, you'd better come round at once. Of course Caroline's disengaged; she's been expecting you.

CAROLINE: *[Aghast.]* Maudel!

MAUDE: Good-bye. *[She puts down the receiver.]* That settles that.

CAROLINE: Maude, I'll never forgive you. It's monstrous. You had no right to say all that. I'll never speak to you again as long as I live. You said I'd been expecting him.

MAUDE: Well, haven't you? And what's more, he knows you've been expecting him. After all these years it really is not worth while for you to play hide-and-seek with one another.

CAROLINE: It's so humiliating. You've told him almost in so many words that I'm sitting here waiting for him to come and make me a proposal of marriage.

MAUDE: So you are.

CAROLINE: Has the possibility occurred to you that I may refuse him?

MAUDE: [*Decidedly.*] No.

CAROLINE: Why not?

MAUDE: You've let him wait for you year after year. He's given you the best of his life. He's sacrificed everything in the hope of marrying you some day. Now you must marry him if you want to or not.

ISABELLA: But you do want to, Caroline?

CAROLINE: [*Hesitatingly.*] I thought so yesterday.

ISABELLA: You know he dotes on you. You'll never find anyone who will love you so faithfully.

CAROLINE: It's loving that's the important thing, not being loved.

MAUDE: But you love him, Caroline. Don't be so silly. All your friends have known for ten years that you loved him. You're not like me. You're one of those constant women. You've never bothered your head about another man since first you made Robert's acquaintance.

ISABELLA: Your feelings can't have changed from one day to another.

CAROLINE: I suppose they can't.

ISABELLA: You *must* accept him, Caroline.

CAROLINE: Yes, I know. [*With a smile.*] Don't be afraid. I'm going to. . . . But don't be harsh with me. It can't be very strange that I'm a little nervous. In fact, I distinctly feel my heart beating in my boots.

ISABELLA: Never mind that. The shyness you're feeling gives you a sort of tremulous charm which, I promise you, is very effective.

CAROLINE: I *must* go and put on some other things. It's only fair to Robert to set out the object he's going to purchase to the best advantage.

ISABELLA: No matter what you wear he'll think you ravishing.

CAROLINE: Dear Robert. I know. But for all that I will not be proposed to in a motor-coat.

ISABELLA: You're going to make him very happy.

CAROLINE: I think I am. I was very foolish just now. I'm beginning to feel more at ease. After all, it is a great pleasure to know that after all his kindness to me, all his unselfish devotion, I have it in my power at last to give him his heart's desire.

[Exit.

MAUDE: That's that.

ISABELLA: Poor Carolinel

MAUDE: Now, will you tell me what is the matter with her.

ISABELLA: [*With a shrug of shoulders.*] Hope deferred. When you've wanted something very badly and it comes at last, it is somehow a little frightening.

MAUDE: You're sure there isn't another man somewhere lurking in the background!

ISABELLA: Oh, quite. Rex Cunningham was here this morning, but she didn't see him. I sent him away.

MAUDE: Very wise of you.

ISABELLA: I felt sorry for him. He's desperately in love with her. But I'm sure she isn't even interested in him. She's only known him three months.

MAUDE: A man you've known three months always has an advantage over a man you've known ten years.

ISABELLA: Now I know why you never married, Maude.

MAUDE: Why?

ISABELLA: Because nobody asked you.

MAUDE: How did you guess?

ISABELLA: Because you have common sense. Men like it in a wife, but not in a girl.

MAUDE: I'm very glad you sent Rex away. When next he comes he'll find everything settled.

[Enter COOPER, followed by REX.]

COOPER: Mr. Cunningham.

[Exit COOPER. The two ladies are taken aback by his unexpected appearance. He is not a little surprised to find ISABELLA still there.]

REX: Oh, I was expecting to find Caroline. [Shaking hands with Miss FULTON.] How do you do?

MAUDE: [Promptly.] She'll be down in one moment. You must stay.

REX: I was going to.

ISABELLA: I thought you were going for a drive?

REX: Alone? I just tootled round the Park, and then I made up my mind that I must see Caroline.

MAUDE: I quite understand. It's nice of you to want to be the first.

REX: [Not comprehending.] I beg your pardon?

MAUDE: [Sweetly.] To congratulate her on her engagement.

REX: [With consternation.] What?

MAUDE: You don't mean to say you didn't know? She's to be married to Robert Oldham almost directly. I think it's so charming that these two dear people should come together after all these years. And you know, they're madly in love with one another.

REX: But they weren't engaged a quarter of an hour ago.

MAUDE: Oh, that's nothing. I've been frequently engaged and broken it off again within twelve minutes.

REX: Of course, that's quite comprehensible.

MAUDE: Do you think so? It isn't true.

REX: It might be. Anyhow, I'm going to wait till I see Caroline.

MAUDE: Why?

REX: Because I'm going to propose to her, if you want to know. [*To ISABELLA.*] I ought never to have let you chivvy me away. It's impossible that she should marry Robert Oldham. It'll break my heart. If you have any kindness you won't try and prevent me from seeing her. I must see her.

MAUDE: Of course, you must see her. You'll hardly recognize her. She looks ten years younger. She's simply radiant. I've never seen anyone look so happy. How she adores that man! [*REX gives a gasp.*] They're going to be married by special licence. They've already made up their minds to go to Venice for their honeymoon. Robert had to go away for a few minutes; she could hardly bear to let him out of her sight.

REX: [*Sinking down crushed.*] My hat! I shall never get over this.

ISABELLA: [*Going up to him.*] My poor boy! Rex! Rex!

REX: It's just like my luck. That's the sort of thing that always happens to me.

MAUDE: I never loved a young gazelle but it was sure to die.

ISABELLA: Maudel! [*To REX compassionately.*] It breaks my heart to see you so wretched.

REX: Nobody ever cares for me.

ISABELLA: Don't say that. It sounds so hopeless.

REX: [*Getting up.*] I'd better go. There's nothing for me to do here now.

ISABELLA: [*Taking his hand.*] Where are you going?

REX: I don't know, I don't care.

ISABELLA: I can't bear to see you like this. . . . Won't you come and dine with me to-night?

REX: You'll find me very dull.

ISABELLA: Oh, no, I shan't.

REX: [*Still holding her hand.*] Very well. You are good to me.

ISABELLA: Good-bye.

REX: You have an extraordinary gift of sympathy. There's something about the blueness of your eyes that seems to console one.

ISABELLA: Dear Rex.

[He goes out with a bow to MAUDE.]

MAUDE: Well, my dear, you're wasting no time.

ISABELLA: *[Indignantly.]* Maudel! The poor boy was absolutely broken up. It made my heart bleed. I couldn't let him go without a word of comfort.

MAUDE: H'm! Why did you ask him to dinner?

ISABELLA: I thought he'd like to talk to me about Caroline. I couldn't bear to think of him passing the whole evening by himself. He would have been too wretched.

MAUDE: Oh, well, with a husband safely tucked away in India you can afford to be a sympathetic friend.

ISABELLA: What things you said to him! It simply made my hair stand on end.

MAUDE: Don't you think it was much the best thing to do? Caroline is in a funny mood. There's something pathetic and rather charming about that young man. I don't deny it for a minute. I've got a heart just as much as you have, my dear. There's no knowing what Caroline might have done in a moment of emotion. It was much better to face him with the accomplished fact.

ISABELLA: You're a wonderful liar, Maude.

MAUDE: Don't be idiotic, my dear. To lie well is one of the privileges of our sex. I don't lie any better than you do. Besides, were they lies? I was only anticipating. In half an hour all I said will be true.

ISABELLA: I don't say you weren't justified.

MAUDE: And what is half an hour? Just think how time changes from one place to another. Why, Caroline's engagement is already ancient history in Petrograd.

ISABELLA: Yes, if you look at it like that it's a white lie at the utmost.

MAUDE: Oh, my dear, not even that. Hardly more than a fib.

[COOPER comes in followed by ROBERT OLDHAM.

ROBERT is a tall handsome man of five-and-forty, well-preserved, but inclined to stoutness; he is well dressed, well cared for, and evidently desirous to hold on to a semblance of youth.

COOPER: Mr. Oldham.

[Exit.

MAUDE: [Enthusiastically.] Robert!

ISABELLA: [Sympathetically.] Dear Robert.

[ROBERT is a little taken aback at the warmth of his greeting, but he braces himself and advances into the room.

ROBERT: You welcome me as though I'd had a narrow shave of being run over by a motor-bus.

ISABELLA: We're very glad to see you.

MAUDE: We've been waiting for you all the morning.

ROBERT: Oh! [With an effort at alacrity.] I wish I'd known.

[Shakes hands with MAUDE.] How do you do?

MAUDE: I *must* kiss you.

ROBERT: Must you?

MAUDE: [Drawing back coyly.] Don't you want me to?

ROBERT: Of course I do. I'd like it.

[He offers her his cheek and she kisses him.

MAUDE: Now don't pretend you're as cool as a cucumber.

Men are so silly. They're so afraid of their emotions.

Of course, you're all in a flutter. Let me feel your pulse.

ROBERT: I shall not. You're very familiar with me, Maude; I don't like it.

MAUDE: Dear Robert.

ROBERT: [*To ISABELLA, taking her hand.*] And how are you, dear lady?

[She leaves her hand in his. It must be a habit of hers.]

ISABELLA: [*A little tremulously.*] I hardly know what to say to you. Oh, Robert, I'm so happy in your happiness. Isn't it wonderful? After all these years—it's so stupid of me, I almost feel as if I could cry.

ROBERT: You have a wonderful heart, Isabella.

ISABELLA: You know I'm not clever. . . . I can't express myself, but believe me, I feel all that you could wish me to feel.

ROBERT: You may kiss me if you wish to.

ISABELLA: [*Laughing.*] I don't.

ROBERT: A rebuff.

MAUDE: But how on earth have you managed to get here?

ROBERT: By the drastic method of taking a taxi.

MAUDE: Don't be exasperating. We were under the impression you had a case this morning.

ROBERT: Who is we?

MAUDE: Caroline, Isabella, and myself.

ROBERT: I see. No; a case which was expected to finish yesterday has turned out rather a long one. I dare say we shan't come on to-day at all.

MAUDE: [*Promptly.*] Then why didn't you come earlier?

ROBERT: It's only midday. I know that Caroline is not an early riser.

MAUDE: You might have telephoned.

ROBERT: I had some papers to read. Business before pleasure, you know. . . . Have you been discussing my silence?

ISABELLA: [*Smiling.*] I think I was right after all. I put it down to delicacy. Any nice man would realize that just

at that moment a woman must prefer to be alone with her recollections.

MAUDE: Anyhow, the important thing is that you're here now. And if I know you at all you've got a ring in your pocket.

[ROBERT gives a slight start.]

ISABELLA: Oh, Robert, do show it me! I'd love to see it.

ROBERT: But I haven't got a ring. I went straight to chambers this morning and then I came straight here. It never occurred to me.

MAUDE: You stupid man! Caroline would have been so pleased.

ISABELLA: And touched. But never mind; when she sees you she'll think of nothing but that she's free and you're here. And for ever and ever you'll be here. Oh, Robert, be kind to her! Remember all she's gone through. You can never do too much for her.

ROBERT: I know.

MAUDE: Have you made up your mind where you're going to spend your honeymoon?

ROBERT: My dear Maude, it's only a couple of hours ago that I saw the sad news of Stephen Ashley's death.

MAUDE: Sad, do you call them?

ROBERT: For him, I mean. Of course, not for me. I don't suppose there's anybody who isn't cared for by someone or other. I expect somebody is regretting him.

MAUDE: I very much doubt it. I think we may safely look upon his death as a happy release.

ROBERT: I don't know why you say that. You know nothing about him except that he had adenoids.

ISABELLA: It's so splendid of Caroline never to have said a single word against him.

ROBERT: Oh, splendid. But, after all, a man may have

adenoids and yet be possessed of all kinds of—admirable qualities.

MAUDE: You're not going to stand up for him. If Caroline refused to say anything against him, it's certainly not because there was nothing to say.

ROBERT: Of course not.

MAUDE: It almost sounded as if you were taking his part.

ROBERT: Good heavens, don't be so literal. I was making a general observation. That's why conversation is impossible with women. They *will* find a personal application in a general statement. Besides, a man with my particular experience knows that a person may have all manner of virtues and yet be insupportable to live with.

ISABELLA: Fortunately that isn't the case with Caroline.

ROBERT: Oh, no; Caroline is wonderful. Who should know it better than I?

MAUDE: Personally, I recommend you to go to Venice.

ROBERT: [*As though he were just on the verge of starting.*] Now?

MAUDE: For your honeymoon I mean.

ROBERT: Oh, I beg your pardon; I'd forgotten for the moment. Can you quite see us gushing up and down the Grand Canal? I fancy we've known one another a little too long for Venice.

MAUDE: Oh, but marriage makes such a difference. You'll have to make one another's acquaintance all over again.

ROBERT: [*Not without anxiety.*] D'you think it'll change Caroline much? I don't know that I should wish that exactly. You see I'm used to this Caroline.

MAUDE: She'll be just the same, only more so.

ROBERT: That is reassuring, but rather vague. My idea would be rather to make a tour of the capitals of Europe.

MAUDE: But you'd spend all your time in railway stations.

ROBERT: I know. That is precisely where a man shows his superiority to a woman. She is flustered and nervous. She's certain they'll miss the train. But he is calm. He sees to the luggage nonchalantly. He has the tickets safe. He keeps an eagle eye on the umbrellas. This is a man—every inch of him, she says; I am but a poor weak woman. Believe me, those are very good lines on which to start married life. I think the capitals of Europe.

ISABELLA: My own impression is that Caroline will want to go to some quiet little place by the seaside.

ROBERT: I don't look my best in bathing costume.

ISABELLA: She'll want to be alone with you surely.

ROBERT: I won't bathe. Nothing will induce me to bathe. I hate cold water. I was only thinking this morning how I hated the sea.

MAUDE: [*Surprised.*] This morning. Why?

ROBERT: I don't know. It just occurred to me. Haven't you made up your mind sometimes in a weak moment to go and have a bathe? You go down to the beach and the sea looks icy. You try not to notice it. You go into your bathing machine, and it's cold and smelly. But you take off your clothes and put on your bathing costume, and then you open the door and you see in front of you a narrow bit of sea. And you wish you were dead.

[During this speech MAUDE and ISABELLA have first pricked up their ears, then stared at him, and, finally, they turn and look at one another with amazement. CAROLINE comes in. She is now charmingly gowned.]

ROBERT: How do you do?

CAROLINE: How d'you do?

MAUDE: You absurd things.

CAROLINE: [*Sharply.*] Don't be ridiculous, Maude.

ISABELLA: We really ought to be going, dear.

CAROLINE: Oh, aren't you going to stay to luncheon?

ISABELLA: [*Obviously inventing.*] I'm lunching out. So are you, Maude, aren't you?

MAUDE: Yes.

CAROLINE: Oh, well, it's early yet. Don't go.

MAUDE: I'm so sorry, but I must go and be tried on. It's such a bore.

ISABELLA: You might drop me, perhaps; I have an appointment with my dentist. Good-bye, darling.

CAROLINE: Good-bye. It's been so nice to see you.

[*They kiss one another.*]

ISABELLA: Good-bye.

MAUDE: [*To ROBERT.*] Dear Robert, we leave her in your care.

ISABELLA: Dear, dear Robert.

[*They go out.*]

ROBERT: That's how elephants must behave when they're being tactful.

CAROLINE: How is it you're here so early? I wasn't expecting you till after the courts rose.

ROBERT: Oh . . . I managed to get away. Maude said you were expecting me.

CAROLINE: Yes, I was expecting you to tea. Don't you remember, you said yesterday you'd look in.

ROBERT: I suppose I couldn't have a whisky and soda?

CAROLINE: Yes, of course I'll ring. [*She touches the bell.*]

ROBERT: I've got to be back in chambers by one.

CAROLINE: You must keep your eye on the time. You mustn't be late.

ROBERT: [*Making conversation.*] What a nice woman Isabella is. Pity she doesn't get on with her husband.

CAROLINE: Oh, but she does, only she gets on better with him when he's in India and she's in England. They're devoted to one another from a distance.

ROBERT: There's something curiously feminine and sympathetic about her. She's not clever, but she's extraordinarily restful. I can imagine a man being extremely attached to Isabella.

CAROLINE: She's still quite pretty.

ROBERT: But, of course, one doesn't know what she'd be like to live with always. That's so different, isn't it?

CAROLINE: [*With conviction.*] Oh, absolutely. [*COOPER comes in.*] Bring up the whisky and soda, Cooper, and a glass.

COOPER: Very good, madam.

[*Exit COOPER.*]

ROBERT: It reminds me of the case I'm in just now. Did you ever meet the Petersens?

CAROLINE: I don't think so.

ROBERT: Quite a nice woman. She was a Mrs. Macdougall. I've known Petersen for twenty years. I'd never have thought him capable of things like that.

CAROLINE: What did he do?

ROBERT: Oh, well, he'd been devoted to Mrs. Macdougall for years. It was an old-standing affair. Everybody accepted it. One always asked them to dinner together. At last they persuaded Macdougall to let himself be divorced. I'm acting for Mrs. Petersen now.

CAROLINE: I must be very stupid, but where does Mrs. Petersen come? You've not mentioned her before.

ROBERT: Mrs. Petersen was Mrs. Macdougall; you see, they got the divorce from Macdougall, then they married, and now they're divorcing.

CAROLINE: Oh, I see. Of course. Very natural. How long have they been married?

ROBERT: Eighteen months. And now they can't stand the sight of one another. She says he's dull when he's sober and brutal when he's drunk.

CAROLINE: Ah! And what does he say?

ROBERT: He marvels at his self-control. He can't imagine why he never killed her.

[A short silence. COOPER comes in with the whisky. She goes out. ROBERT helps himself.]

ROBERT: I did a very unprofessional thing. I had a chat with Petersen in the club the other night. I told him I couldn't discuss the matter, but he insisted on telling me that he had no ill-feeling towards me because I was appearing for his wife. He said he only had himself to blame.

CAROLINE: That was nice of him.

ROBERT: Oh, he didn't mean it like that. He meant he ought to have known better than to marry her. He said if a woman couldn't get on with one husband you might bet your boots she wouldn't get on with another. *[There is a momentary silence.]* Very nice whisky this is of yours, Caroline.

CAROLINE: You ought to like it. You chose it.

[He takes out a cigarette and lights it elaborately, pretending he is quite at ease.]

ROBERT: So your husband has died at last, Caroline.

CAROLINE: Yes.

ROBERT: I suppose you don't know what he died of?

CAROLINE: No, I have no idea.

ROBERT: Fever, I suppose. A man has to have a very fine physique to stand those climates indefinitely.

CAROLINE: Stephen had a very fine physique.

ROBERT: I suppose it was a great surprise to you when you read the announcement in this morning's Times?

CAROLINE: Yes, it was.

ROBERT: After all, death, even that of a person who was indifferent to you, is always a shock.

CAROLINE: Yes, when a man is dead you seem only to remember his good qualities.

ROBERT: It must be over ten years since you've seen him. I remember, when first I met you, you'd only been separated about three months. You haven't changed a bit in these ten years, Caroline.

CAROLINE: I'm afraid that's only your fancy. You've seen me almost every day since then, and you naturally wouldn't notice any difference in me.

ROBERT: That's true. In a way it's been a wonderful ten years, Caroline. We've found constant amusement in one another's society. You've been a great help to me. You've seen me rise from a struggling junior to a pretty good position. I don't see why I shouldn't be a judge before I die.

CAROLINE: We've had some very good times together, haven't we?

ROBERT: Wonderful!

CAROLINE: You've been a dear, Robert. You've always been so kind and patient.

ROBERT: It certainly hasn't been hard to be either.

CAROLINE: And you've got certain points that are strangely endearing. You never forget the little anniversaries that men find a bore to remember, but that women think so much of. You never fail to send me a little present on my birthday. Why, you even remember the day we first met and send me flowers. Ten times you've done that, Robert.

ROBERT: By George, if this had only happened ten years ago. What a difference it would have made to us. We should be quite an old married couple by now, Caroline.

CAROLINE: Do you wish it had?

ROBERT: What a question! Why, every day for ten years I've read the obituary column of *The Times* for that notice. It added a savour to breakfast.

CAROLINE: And now at last it's come.

ROBERT: I realize that I've lost for ever the little thrill of excitement that I always had when I took up the paper. I've often wished that your name began with a V or a W instead of an A, so that I might be able to prolong the agony a little as I read deliberately down the column.

CAROLINE: There's always something a little melancholy in getting what one wants.

ROBERT: Do you know, Caroline, I've never even seen a photograph of your husband.

CAROLINE: I'm afraid I haven't one. When we separated I destroyed everything that could possibly remind me of him.

ROBERT: I know. I shall never even know what that man looked like, and yet he has influenced my life more than anyone else in the world. What sort of a man was he, Caroline?

CAROLINE: An ordinary sort of man.

ROBERT: It's rather queer if you come to think of it. If he hadn't lived I should have had an entirely different life; if he'd died years ago I should be another man from what I am now. Just by existing, a thousand miles away, obscurely, he's made me what I am.

CAROLINE: Then we have at least something to be grateful to him for.

ROBERT: Caroline, what a charming thing to say!

CAROLINE: I never thought of it before, but I suppose I, too, have been influenced by Stephen, even though I never set eyes on him. I shouldn't be what I am either but for him.

ROBERT: Life is a strange business, Caroline.

CAROLINE: I'm beginning to think so.

[A short silence.]

ROBERT: Well, I expect you've got a lot of things to do. I mustn't keep you.

CAROLINE: And you have an appointment, haven't you? You mustn't be late for that.

ROBERT: Oh, I've got my eye on the time.

CAROLINE: Yes, I imagined you had.

ROBERT: I thought I'd like to have a little chat with you at once.

CAROLINE: It was kind of you to come, it's been pleasant to see you.

ROBERT: I'll look in again about tea-time, may I?

CAROLINE: Oh, yes, that'll be nice. I dare say I can get one or two people so that we can have a rubber of bridge before dinner.

ROBERT: That always rests me after I've been in court. Well, good-bye, Caroline, God bless you.

CAROLINE: Good-bye. I hope you win your case.

ROBERT: Thanks.

[He goes to the door and opens it. She steps towards the bell to ring. At the door he hesitates. She looks at him and pauses. He half shuts the door and meditates. She withdraws her hand from the bell. He opens the door again, and she stretches out her hand once more. He braces himself for the ordeal, shuts the door quickly and comes back into the room. She turns away from the bell.]

ROBERT: *[With assumed cheerfulness.]* I was almost forgetting the purpose of my visit.

CAROLINE: Oh! Didn't you come just to pass the time of day?

ROBERT: Well, not exactly, I think I'll just have a little drop more whisky if you don't mind. I can't imagine why my throat is so dry this morning.

CAROLINE: I dare say there's a touch of east in the wind.

ROBERT: [*Pouring out the whisky.*] Well, Caroline, what shall we do about it?

CAROLINE: About what?

ROBERT: [*Very busy with the siphon.*] When would you like us to be married?

CAROLINE: Well, I haven't thought about the matter.

ROBERT: We arranged that we would be as soon as your husband died.

CAROLINE: Yes, I know.

ROBERT: [*With assumed facetiousness.*] It only remains for you to name the day.

CAROLINE: I'm not going to name one.

ROBERT: My dear Caroline, you must. That is by old established custom the privilege of your sex.

CAROLINE: What day would you suggest?

ROBERT: Obstinate woman! I suppose you'll want some time to get a trousseau. And then banns take three weeks, don't they? I couldn't get away till the end of term, anyhow. What about the beginning of the Long Vacation?

CAROLINE: I'm not going to marry you, Robert.

ROBERT: Carolinel

CAROLINE: I've thought it over very carefully and I've completely made up my mind.

ROBERT: Do you mean to tell me that nothing I can say will induce you to change it?

CAROLINE: [*With a twinkle in her eyes.*] No.

ROBERT: This is an awful shock to me, Caroline. This is an awful blow. I've been living in hopes of this moment

for years, and now . . . now . . . you could knock me down with a feather.

CAROLINE: [*With her tongue in her cheek.*] I'm sorry to cause you pain, Robert, but, believe me, I am acting for the best.

ROBERT: Do you mean to say that you absolutely refuse to marry me?

CAROLINE: Absolutely.

ROBERT: [*A little uneasily.*] Caroline, has anything in my behaviour led you to imagine that my heart wasn't set on marrying you? Would your answer have been different if I had expressed myself differently? Women are very strange. Haven't I been ardent enough? You must remember that I'm a shy man. This is an occasion when one may reasonably feel a certain embarrassment. I'm no longer in my first youth, Caroline. I should have felt ridiculous if I'd thrown myself on one knee and all that sort of thing. I have had no wide and varied experience in making proposals of marriages.

CAROLINE: Really. In that case I can only congratulate you. You made this one as though to the manner born. You were as cool as though you were ordering a dozen oysters and a pint of champagne.

ROBERT: I didn't feel it, Caroline. I was shaking in every limb.

CAROLINE: After all, you came to the point at once. I've known men with whom it required months of patience on the part of the object of their affections to bring them to it.

ROBERT: Then I cannot understand why you refused me.

CAROLINE: My dear Robert, we've been very happy in one another's company for ten years. We've been joined together by a very charming sentiment. Don't you think it would be a pity to expose it to the wear and tear of domestic life?

ROBERT: You're a wonderful woman, Caroline.

CAROLINE: Oh, it *had* occurred to you.

ROBERT: It hadn't exactly occurred to me, but it had crossed my mind. After all, one has to look at these things from a rational point of view. We're very well as we are.

CAROLINE: It seems a pity to make a change.

ROBERT: Not a pity, Caroline; a risk.

CAROLINE: Then you agree that I was wise to refuse you?

ROBERT: From your point of view, Caroline, I dare say there's a great deal to be said in favour of your decision. I, of course, could only have gained by the change.

CAROLINE: It's nice of you to say so. But are you sure that you're not a little relieved that I refused you?

ROBERT: I? My dear Caroline, can't you see I'm overwhelmed with disappointment?

CAROLINE: It's not visible to the naked eye, Robert.

ROBERT: You forget I have great power of self-control.

CAROLINE: I shouldn't be hurt if you confessed that at the bottom of your heart you were feeling as though you'd deliberately put your head in a noose, and then by a merciful interposition of Providence . . .

ROBERT: [*Interrupting.*] Caroline, I have been wanting to marry you for years. And now that the opportunity at last occurs you refuse me. Well, I accept your reasons. I bow to the inevitable. I know you too well to try to make you change your mind, but don't think because I take it like this that my heart isn't . . .

CAROLINE: Seared.

ROBERT: Are you laughing at me, Caroline?

[He looks at her. She begins to chuckle. For a moment he assumes a pose of indignation. She tries to restrain her laughter, but finds it impossible; he is gained by it, and begins to laugh also. Then they both roar till the tears run down their cheeks.]

ROBERT: Caroline, you're adorable.

CAROLINE: You humbug, Robert.

ROBERT: My dear, I had to do it. And I've done it, mind you, I've done it.

CAROLINE: Yes, you've done it. And now we'll forget all about it.

ROBERT: You know, I was terrified, Caroline.

CAROLINE: Poor dear, I know. Your heart was in your boots, wasn't it?

ROBERT: You don't bear me a grudge?

CAROLINE: Of course not.

ROBERT: You're wonderful, Caroline. Upon my soul, I could almost marry you.

CAROLINE: Dearest, I could very nearly consent to be your wife.

END OF THE FIRST ACT

THE SECOND ACT

The scene is the same.

It is a little after four o'clock in the afternoon of the same day.

CAROLINE is standing by the window looking out. COOPER comes in.

COOPER: Mrs. Gilliatt has rung up to say she hopes you haven't forgotten you're going to tea with her at Rumplemeyer's, madam.

CAROLINE: I haven't forgotten, Cooper. But I haven't the least intention of going.

COOPER: I said I'd give you the message, ma'am; but I said I didn't think you were feeling very well.

CAROLINE: It hadn't occurred to me, but I don't think I *am* feeling very well. I wish it would rain. It's so exasperating when the weather doesn't fit in with one's moods.

COOPER: Shall I ring up Mrs. Gilliatt and say you're sorry you can't come to tea, ma'am?

CAROLINE: Yes; I think I'll lie down. The more I think of it the more I think I'm not very well.

[She lies down on the sofa.]

COOPER: When one's feeling like what you are, ma'am, it always makes one feel better not to feel very well.

CAROLINE: *[Smiling.]* That's rather confused, Cooper; but I believe it's quite true. Put a lot of cushions behind me. *[This COOPER does.]* Thank you. Now put the cigarettes where I can reach them.

COOPER: *[Fetching them.]* Yes, madam.

CAROLINE: There are two books over there. Let me have

them, will you? Thank you. And give me the picture papers. There!

COOPER: Shall I cover up your feet, ma'am?

CAROLINE: You might put that Spanish shawl over them, Cooper. It's always satisfactory to look nice even if there's no one to see you.

[COOPER carries out CAROLINE's various directions.]

COOPER: There, ma'am. Is there anything else?

CAROLINE: No. I feel better already. I'm not at home to anybody, and I won't speak to anyone on the telephone.

COOPER: Very good, ma'am.

CAROLINE: I'm extremely pleased with my own society, Cooper. It's very nice to be alone when one wants to. I like to think it's my own house and nobody can cross my threshold without permission. It's really very pleasant to be one's own mistress.

COOPER: Some people like a man about the house, ma'am, and some people don't.

CAROLINE: I don't.

COOPER: Ah, well, ma'am, you're one of the lucky ones; you can please yourself.

CAROLINE: Cooper, what *do* you mean? You're not dissatisfied with your young man?

COOPER: No, ma'am, not exactly that. But I don't know as I'd marry him if I 'ad anything better to look forward to.

CAROLINE: But you're not obliged to marry him, Cooper.

COOPER: Him or somebody else. It's not very satisfactory being in service all your life. And it isn't so easy for a parlourmaid to find places when she's getting on a bit.

CAROLINE: Tell me, Cooper, how did he propose?

COOPER: Well, ma'am, I don't know as he exactly proposed at all. You see, it was like this. I'd been walking out

with him for something like two years, and he never said anything that you could take hold of, so to speak, so at last I said to him: Well, what about it? What about what? he said. You know what I mean, I said. I do not, he said. Well, do you mean it or do you not? I said. Is it a riddle? he said. No, I said, but I've been walking out with you for two years, and I just want to know if anything's to come of it or not. Oh, he said. I don't mind one way or the other, I said; but I'm not going to waste my time till doomsday, and I just want to know, that's all. Well, he said, what do you propose? Well, I said, what about August Bank Holiday? Make it Christmas, he said; I get a rise then. All right, I said, as long as I know where I am I don't mind waiting, but I like to know where I am.

CAROLINE: It wasn't very romantic, Cooper.

COOPER: Well, ma'am, my belief is that men don't want to marry. It's not in their nature. You 'ave to give them a little push or you'll never bring them to it.

CAROLINE: And supposing they regret it afterwards, Cooper?

COOPER: Oh, well, ma'am, it's too late then. And you know, ma'am, they generally try to make the best of it when they know they can't help themselves.

CAROLINE: And let us look on the bright side of things, Cooper; they're often not unhappy, poor brutes.

COOPER: Oh, no, ma'am, I think they're much happier; but sometimes they won't realize it, so to speak.

CAROLINE: That's human nature, Cooper. You won't forget to telephone to Mrs. Gilliatt.

COOPER: [*Going.*] No, ma'am, I'll ring her up at once.

CAROLINE: Oh, and Cooper, you might ring up Dr. Cornish and ask him if he can come round.

COOPER: I thought you were feeling better, ma'am?

CAROLINE: I am, but I think it would comfort me to see a doctor. To be able to talk about oneself without fear of interruption is cheap at half a guinea.

COOPER: Very good, ma'am.

[*Exit. CAROLINE settles herself more comfortably than ever on the sofa; she takes one of the illustrated papers and begins to look at it. The door is quietly opened, and MAUDE FULTON puts a roguish bead round the corner.*]

MAUDE: May I come in?

CAROLINE: Good heavens, how you startled me!

MAUDE: Say I may come in, Caroline.

CAROLINE: No, you may not come in.

MAUDE: [*Edging herself in.*] Don't be brutal, Caroline.

CAROLINE: I think I've got scarlet fever.

MAUDE: [*Opening the door a little more.*] I've had it.

CAROLINE: On the other hand, it may be small-pox.

MAUDE: [*Coming right in.*] I'm constantly being vaccinated.

CAROLINE: I'm not at home, Maude.

MAUDE: I know, but I felt sure you'd see me. Cooper didn't want to let me come up.

CAROLINE: Servants are not what they were. She should only have let you force your way over her inanimate corpse.

MAUDE: Darling, surely a corpse couldn't be anything else but inanimate.

CAROLINE: Just as an intruder couldn't be anything else but intolerable.

MAUDE: Now that you've had the last word, offer me a cup of tea and tell me all about it.

CAROLINE: I shall *not*, Maude.

MAUDE: Now don't be ridiculous, Caroline. I felt I *must* see you. You can't expect me to be entirely devoid of curiosity.

CAROLINE: After knowing you for twenty years? No, my dear, I don't. But, on the other hand, you can't expect me to be such a fool as to gratify it.

MAUDE: I naturally wanted to be the first to congratulate you. [*Insinuatingly.*] Caroline, tell me now how he did it.

CAROLINE: D'you think it's fair to a man to tell a third party what romantic madness seized his tongue at such a moment?

MAUDE: [*Eagerly.*] Oh, my dear, go on. I'm thrilled to the core.

CAROLINE: [*She looks at her with an ironical smile.*] I was standing in the middle of the room, Maude, and he came up to me, and fell on one knee.

MAUDE: Yes, Sir Walter Raleigh.

CAROLINE: He took my hand. I turned a little away.

MAUDE: Yes, yes.

CAROLINE: At last, he said, at last! Oh, I have waited for this moment for a hundred years. I know I am utterly unworthy of you, but I adore the very ground you tread on. You are my ideal of woman. Oh, Caroline, Caroline, will you be mine? Clarence, I said. . . .

MAUDE: Robert, you mean, surely.

CAROLINE: [*Bursting into laughter.*] You fool, Maude. Can you see Robert making such a perfect ass of himself?

MAUDE: Really, Caroline, you are exasperating.

CAROLINE: Shall I tell you the honest truth?

MAUDE. [*Acidly.*] If you can.

CAROLINE: He fiddled about with a siphon, and said: Well, when would you like to be married?

MAUDE: Oh! I prefer the other way; but after all it comes to the same in the end. Darling, I congratulate you with all my heart.

CAROLINE: On getting an offer at my time of life? Thank you very much.

MAUDE: Don't be so silly. On your engagement.

CAROLINE: But I'm not engaged.

MAUDE: What *are* you talking about?

CAROLINE: I refused him.

MAUDE: Good heavens! Why?

CAROLINE: I thought I should be happier if I remained as I was.

MAUDE: Caroline, how cruel of you! How abominably selfish! But what did Robert say?

CAROLINE: He was almost too much surprised for words.

MAUDE: Wasn't he overwhelmed?

CAROLINE: I could see it was a disappointment, but he did all he could not to make it more difficult for me.

MAUDE: I can hardly believe my ears. What are you going to do, then?

CAROLINE: I'm going to remain a widow. And to make it quite clear, I shall go into mourning. Crêpe and weeds and all the trappings of woe. [MAUDE meditates for a moment, while CAROLINE watches her, wondering whether she accepts her account of the incident.] D'you think they'll suit me?

MAUDE. [Tartly.] If they don't, I think you can be trusted not to wear them long.

CAROLINE: I don't see why you should be cross with me.

MAUDE: I'm disappointed in you, Caroline, and I'm very, very, very sorry for Robert.

CAROLINE: Marry him, then.

MAUDE: I'm not a marrying woman.

CAROLINE: Neither am I. Sisters in adversity.

MAUDE: Of course, he'll ask you again.

CAROLINE: He's not such a fool.

MAUDE: What do you mean by that?

CAROLINE: [*Seeing that she has nearly given herself away.*] He knows he can go on asking me till he's blue in the face and I shall say no.

MAUDE: Then there's nothing more to be said.

CAROLINE: Nothing.

[*COOPER comes in to announce DR. CORNISH. This is a very stout, red-faced, jovial gentleman, with an optimistic view of life.*]

COOPER: Dr. Cornish.

CAROLINE: How do you do? Cooper, did you send that message?

COOPER: Yes, ma'am. Mrs. Gilliatt said she'd just heard the dreadful news, and it must be a terrible shock and she quite understood; you had her sincerest sympathy, and she hoped you wouldn't forget that you were playing bridge with her to-morrow afternoon.

CAROLINE: Thank you.

[*Exit COOPER.*]

CAROLINE: [*Turning to DR. CORNISH.*] Now I can attend to you.

DR. CORNISH: That's what I've come to do to you.

CAROLINE: You know Miss Fulton?

DR. CORNISH: [*Shaking hands with her.*] A homeopath, I believe.

MAUDE: Oh, no, I've given that up. But I've got a wonderful bone-setter that I go to now.

DR. CORNISH: Dear me, have you been breaking your bones?

MAUDE: No, but I might.

DR. CORNISH: I can recommend a very competent motor-omnibus if you are looking for something to run over you.

CAROLINE: Now, Maude, Dr. Cornish has come to see me professionally. You've stayed quite long enough.

MAUDE: Are you ill, darling?

CAROLINE: I shall know that when Dr. Cornish has examined me.

MAUDE: I thought you weren't looking quite up to the mark. Of course I'll go.

CAROLINE: And don't come back till you're sent for.

MAUDE: Dear Caroline. It's lucky I know she's devoted to me, or I might take offence at some of the things she says to me. Good-bye, Dr. Cornish.

DR. CORNISH: [*Shaking hands with her.*] Does the bone-setter make love to you?

MAUDE: Not more than most men.

[*Exit.*]

DR. CORNISH: Now, dear lady, what is the matter with you?

CAROLINE: Ill-temper.

DR. CORNISH: An ailment very distressing to ladies' maids, I've always understood. I noticed you were suffering from it.

CAROLINE: I didn't send for you so that you might have the pleasure of making yourself disagreeable and earning half a guinea into the bargain.

DR. CORNISH: It does seem unfair, doesn't it? Let me feel your pulse.

CAROLINE: [*As he takes her wrist.*] There's nothing wrong with my body. It's my mind.

DR. CORNISH: What is amiss with that?

CAROLINE: Well, for one thing I don't know it.

DR. CORNISH: The British Empire is governed exclusively by gentlemen who suffer from the same complaint. You mustn't let that worry you.

CAROLINE: I'm vexed and bored.

DR. CORNISH: Has this got anything to do with the announcement I read in this morning's paper? I can well understand that the loss of a husband might cause any woman a momentary vexation.

CAROLINE: No, I don't think it's that. I've just redecorated my dining-room, and I don't think it's quite a success. And, you know, these new fashions don't suit me. I'm not pleased with any of the clothes I bought this spring. I dare say I'm a little run down and want a change of air.

DR. CORNISH: Quite so. Quite so. Now tell me the truth.

CAROLINE: But I'm telling you the truth.

DR. CORNISH: Yes, I know; but the true truth. Women make such distinction between the two.

CAROLINE: [*Smiling.*] You must have a very large practice, Dr. Cornish.

DR. CORNISH: I get along. Now come, dear lady.

CAROLINE: I sent for you because I wanted to tell you the truth. I've known you so long, and I can trust you. You know, I'm devoted to Robert Oldham. I've wanted to marry him ever since we first met. And now that the opportunity has come, I don't want to.

DR. CORNISH: I see.

CAROLINE: Of course, nobody knows. Robert thinks I'm dying to marry him. And all my friends. You see, it was an understood thing that we should marry as soon as I was free. He's waited for me all these years.

DR. CORNISH: It's awkward, isn't it? I can see that Robert Oldham will think you a little unreasonable. He's no longer a young man.

CAROLINE: That is what I said to myself. I thought the matter over from every standpoint. I remembered Robert's infinite patience, his devotion and self-sacrifice, and I made up my mind that it was my duty to marry him.

DR. CORNISH: It's hard to speak of duty in these matters; but if you ask my opinion, in this particular case I think you're right.

CAROLINE: He came here this morning. I discovered that he didn't want to marry me in the least.

DR. CORNISH: Well, that simplifies matters.

CAROLINE: It does nothing of the kind. I was prepared to sacrifice myself. I'd made up my mind to an act of renunciation. I'd promised myself that he should never, never know the truth. You don't think it's pleasant to realize suddenly that you're not wanted, and you can keep your self-sacrifice. It's enough to make any woman feel not very well.

DR. CORNISH: Now, don't work yourself up into a scene, dear lady.

CAROLINE: Why not?

DR. CORNISH: I've seen so many. I assure you they have no effect on me at all.

CAROLINE: In that case it isn't worth while, is it? But it is vexatious, Dr. Cornish, isn't it?

DR. CORNISH: Very.

CAROLINE: Upon my word I could almost wish my husband were alive again. [*No sooner are the words out of her mouth than the telephone bell rings.*] Good heavens, how it startled me! I told Cooper I wouldn't speak to anyone. Oh, I know what it is. It's my solicitor. They've had the answer to my cable. [*She takes up the receiver and listens.*] Yes. Lester and Lester? I was expecting you to ring me up. Yes, I'll hold on. [*To DR. CORNISH.*] They're putting me through to Sir Henry. Oh, the suspense! You know, I've had two or three false alarms of Stephen's death before. Oh, if he's only alive this time it'll make such a difference. It'll put an end to all my difficulties. [*Speaking into the receiver.*] Yes. Sir

Henry? You haven't had an answer to your cable? Then . . . Oh! [*To DR. CORNISH.*] He's seen Stephen's solicitor. [*Listening.*] I see. Thank you very much. It was kind of you to ring me up. Good-bye.

[She puts down the receiver.]

DR. CORNISH: Well?

CAROLINE: Stephen's solicitor has had a further cable from Nairobi. It appears my husband died in the hospital there four days ago of cirrhosis of the liver. Is that the sort of disease he would die from?

DR. CORNISH: You must know that better than I. I never knew him.

CAROLINE: Could brandy bring it on?

DR. CORNISH: Nothing better.

CAROLINE: Then that settles it. There can be no more doubt. I'm free.

DR. CORNISH: Don't say it so despondently. It's a condition that most married people aspire to.

CAROLINE: Doesn't it strike you that there's something distressingly obvious in being a widow? I can quite understand why a more delicate civilization than ours ordered the immolation of widows on their husband's pyre.

DR. CORNISH: My dear lady, you take too gloomy a view of the situation. From the days of the ancients a certain gaiety has been ascribed to the condition which you now adorn.

CAROLINE: I refuse to be gay. My husband spited me for ten years by living, now he spites me more than ever before by dying.

DR. CORNISH: D'you know what's the matter with you?

CAROLINE: If you say appendicitis I'll kill you.

DR. CORNISH: I wish I could, for that is an ailment which can be cured by a trifling operation. But there's no escape from the malady I have in mind. There's no cure.

There are no palliatives even. The most eminent physician in the world can do no more than offer sympathy and consolation.

CAROLINE: My dear Dr. Cornish, you freeze the very marrow in my bones. Tell me what it is quickly. I will brace myself to bear the worst.

DR. CORNISH: Middle age.

CAROLINE: Say that again.

DR. CORNISH: Middle age.

CAROLINE: Impossible! Oh, impossible!

DR. CORNISH: Let me suggest one or two symptoms to you. Haven't you noticed lately how young the policemen are about the streets? Why, they're mere boys. But when you were a girl, don't you remember, they were middle-aged men.

CAROLINE: Now that you come to speak of it I *have* noticed that the policemen are very young nowadays.

DR. CORNISH: And when you're in a house party, haven't you noticed that some of the young people are really very rowdy? It's lucky they keep more or less to themselves because their conversation really is very tedious.

CAROLINE: But it *is* very tedious.

DR. CORNISH: It's just the same as it was fifteen years ago, and you didn't find it so then.

CAROLINE: You're beginning to frighten me.

DR. CORNISH: You're devoted to dancing, aren't you?

CAROLINE: [*Brightly.*] Passionately. That, at all events, hasn't left me.

DR. CORNISH: But don't you find by about one in the morning you're rather tired and quite ready to go home?

CAROLINE: I naturally don't want to be a wreck next day.

DR. CORNISH: Were you a wreck next day fifteen years ago?

CAROLINE: I used to be able to sleep till twelve o'clock next morning.

DR. CORNISH: And now you can't? I know. At whatever time you go to bed you awake about eight, don't you? One does, you know, as one grows older.

CAROLINE: I'm beginning to feel a hundred.

DR. CORNISH: You mustn't take it too hardly. Things haven't gone very far yet.

CAROLINE: [*Ironically.*] Thank you so much.

DR. CORNISH: Perhaps you've noticed one white hair on your head, and you've said to your friends: I'm sure I shall be prematurely grey.

CAROLINE: Are you enjoying this, Dr. Cornish?

DR. CORNISH: It's not so tragic as you think.

CAROLINE: Middle age?

DR. CORNISH: It's true there are no remedies. Rouge, dye, powder and pencil are not even palliatives; they merely emphasize the obvious.

CAROLINE: You have nothing to recommend but resignation?

DR. CORNISH: I can offer comfort.

CAROLINE: [*Shaking her head.*] No.

DR. CORNISH: Dear lady, it's the happy time of a man's life. You have learnt your limitations. They are like a pack of cards, with which the skilful conjuror can do a hundred tricks. Passion no longer holds you enslaved. You go your way and attach no more importance to the opinion of your fellows than is seemly. You are sound in wind and limb and you are free. Good heavens, when I was young I did things I didn't want to because other people did. Now I do what I like. I wear the clothes I fancy, and don't ask myself if they're the fashion. When I'm tired I go to bed. When I'm bored I betake myself to my own counsel. Believe me, middle age is very pleasant. A book, a glass of wine, and

Amaryllis sporting in the shade, while I—bask in the sun.

CAROLINE: Is it because I'm middle-aged that Robert no longer wants to marry me?

DR. CORNISH: Not at all. I was explaining why you no longer wanted to marry him.

CAROLINE: [*Taking a little mirror out of her bag and looking at herself in it.*] I see myself no different from what I was yesterday or ten years ago.

DR. CORNISH: You're a very charming and a very fascinating woman.

CAROLINE: I was never beautiful. At my best I was no more than pretty, but I've been quite content with that. People have found me amusing.

DR. CORNISH: None more than I.

CAROLINE: I've never lacked admiration. . . . It's been the breath of my nostrils, Dr. Cornish. If all that is to go, what is there left? Charity and good works? You talk like a man. You talk like a fool. You don't know what middle age is to a woman. It's very hard. It gives me such a pain in my heart. [*She begins to cry a little.* DR. CORNISH *watches her with not unkindly amusement.*] You're not going to charge me for this, are you? That would be more than I could bear.

DR. CORNISH: On the contrary, I'm going to charge you double. A doctor is only supposed to give drugs, but I've given you common sense. [*CAROLINE gives a little cry.*] What is the matter?

CAROLINE: May your hair fall out in bushels, and all your teeth rattle from your palsied gums. May your joints ache with rheumatism and your toes tingle with gout. May you wheeze and snore like an overfed pug, and blow like a ridiculous grampus.

DR. CORNISH: Mercy!

CAROLINE: What a fool I am to let myself be harassed by you. We're nothing in ourselves. We're what other people think we are. I've just thought of Rex.

DR. CORNISH: Who the dickens is Rex?

CAROLINE: Rex is passion and youth and love. To him, at all events, I'm young and charming. He loves me.

DR. CORNISH: Ho, hol

CAROLINE: [*Going to the telephone.*] Mayfair 2315. Rex? D'you know who it is? [*She makes her voice as seductive as she knows how.*] What are you doing? Idle creature. Under the circumstances . . . Under what circumstances? Would you like to come and dine with me to-night? [*Her face changes.*] Engaged? You've never been engaged before when I've asked you. Can't you break the engagement? Oh, of course, if there's any difficulty you mustn't think of it. Anyhow, come round and see me now; we'll drink a dish of tea together. Very well. [*She puts down the receiver.*] He's coming at once.

DR. CORNISH: What are you going to do?

CAROLINE: I? Oh, I'm going to tell him that I've refused Robert.

DR. CORNISH: And then?

CAROLINE: [*Smiling.*] Then we'll see.

[She draws a long, triumphant breath. It is obvious that she expects the young man then to fling his passionate heart at her feet.]

DR. CORNISH: My advice to you is to marry Robert Oldham.

CAROLINE: He doesn't want to marry me.

DR. CORNISH: Nag him a little.

CAROLINE: Why should I marry him? He's not young. I don't believe we're suited to one another.

DR. CORNISH: You try. You'll find you'll jog along quite comfortably.

CAROLINE: Good heavens, I don't want to jog along. I want poetry, passion, romance.

DR. CORNISH: [*Soothingly.*] Yes. I think I'll write you a little prescription. I dare say a gentle sedative will do you no harm.

CAROLINE: [*As he prepares to sit down.*] You can write as many prescriptions as you like, but if you think I'm going to take your beastly medicine you're very much mistaken.

DR. CORNISH: [*Writing.*] Human emotion is a queer business. Has it ever struck you that with a few grains of one drug you can make the timid heroic, and with a few grams of another the romantic, matter-of-fact. You can make the *femme incomprise* satisfied with her lot and the adventurer content to stick to his desk. You have read that the history of the world would have been different if Cleopatra's nose had been longer. My dear, I have no doubt that if Cleopatra had been treated with valerian and massage she would never have made such a fool of herself at the Battle of Actium, and I'm convinced that with the administration of a certain amount of strychnine and iron I could have persuaded Antony that it wasn't worth while to lose an empire for her sake. Take this three times a day after meals. You'll find it'll do you a lot of good.

CAROLINE: I don't want to be done good to.

[COOPER comes in.]

COOPER: Mrs. Trench has called, ma'am.

CAROLINE: I'm not at home, Cooper.

COOPER: I said you were not at home, ma'am; but Mrs. Trench says you telephoned for her to come at once.

CAROLINE: I? I did no such thing.

COOPER: What shall I say, ma'am?

CAROLINE: I suppose she must come up.

COOPER: Very good, ma'am.

[*Exit.*]

DR. CORNISH: Well, good-bye, dear lady.

CAROLINE: I'm twenty-five, Dr. Cornish. Romance is on the way to my door in a two-seater.

DR. CORNISH: Send it away, and let common sense come trundling along in a four-wheeler.

CAROLINE: Never. Good-bye.

[*DR. CORNISH goes out. In a moment ISABELLA comes in with MAUDE FULTON.*]

CAROLINE: I'm delighted to see you, Isabella; but I can't make out what you mean by saying I telephoned.

MAUDE: I telephoned.

CAROLINE: You!

MAUDE: I think it's absurd that you should refuse Robert Oldham. I sent for Isabella so that we might talk it over.

CAROLINE: May I ask what business it is of Isabella's?

ISABELLA: My dear, when your friends see you about to make a terrible mistake, they wouldn't be friends if they didn't do everything they could to save you from it.

CAROLINE: I take it that you've talked the matter out downstairs.

MAUDE: I put the case before Isabella as I saw it.

ISABELLA: I can hardly believe it even now. It's the most astounding thing I've ever heard in my life.

CAROLINE: I hope you've had a pleasant chat. Now I will ask you both to go away. I'm going to lie down.

MAUDE: [*Sitting down firmly.*] No, Caroline, we will not go till you've heard what we have to say.

ISABELLA: There must be some misunderstanding. It only requires a little good-will and everything can be put right.

CAROLINE: Robert and I understand one another only too well.

ISABELLA: I wonder if you haven't known him so long that you've ceased to realize what a very attractive man he is.

CAROLINE: [*A little surprised.*] Do you find him so?

ISABELLA: He's one of the most charming men I've ever met.

CAROLINE: Oh!

ISABELLA: He's very handsome. He has charming eyes.

CAROLINE: Ah! That's just what he says about you.

ISABELLA: [*Pleased.*] Really? Do tell me what he says.

CAROLINE: What a pity you can't marry him yourself, Isabella!

ISABELLA: Oh, I! He's never had eyes for anybody when you've been there.

CAROLINE: Not till to-day. But then I'm not always there, am I?

ISABELLA: What do you mean, Caroline? You're speaking quite acidly.

CAROLINE: Oh, nothing.

MAUDE: All that is neither here nor there. You can't afford to refuse Robert. You've been a good deal talked about in connection with Robert Oldham; but your friends have been exceedingly sympathetic owing to the peculiar circumstances. But honestly you owe it to them just as much as to yourself to marry the man as soon as you can.

CAROLINE: I'm going to marry to please myself, not to please my friends.

MAUDE: Besides, it's high time you settled down.

CAROLINE: Upon my word, I don't know why.

MAUDE: You're no chicken, Caroline.

CAROLINE: At all events, I'm younger than you, darling.

MAUDE: A widow is as old as her possible husband, a spinster is as young as her latest young man.

CAROLINE: Then if I choose a husband at all I'll choose one younger than Robert.

ISABELLA: My dear, he's a perfect age. Everyone knows that young men think of nothing but themselves. It's the man of forty-five who makes much of you.

MAUDE: Dear Caroline, I think the time has arrived to be frank.

CAROLINE: Good heavens, haven't you been frank hitherto?

MAUDE: I've been doing my best to spare your feelings.

CAROLINE: I hadn't noticed it.

MAUDE: I'm afraid I shall have to make myself a little unpleasant.

CAROLINE: For my good or for your own satisfaction?

MAUDE: By a merciful interposition of providence in these matters one can generally combine the two. I feel it my duty to tell you the whole truth.

CAROLINE: Will it take very long?

MAUDE: Why?

CAROLINE: Only that I'm expecting Rex in a minute or two, and I'm afraid I must ask you to leave me when he comes.

MAUDE: That's a very strange request.

CAROLINE: He has asked to see me alone.

MAUDE: What does he want?

CAROLINE: I'm sure I don't know. I'm filled with curiosity.

MAUDE: I won't conceal from you that I'm surprised, Caroline.

CAROLINE: Are you?

MAUDE: Yes, you see, I told him you were engaged to Robert Oldham.

CAROLINE: [*Indignantly.*] You didn't. How dare you! Really, Maude, you take too much upon yourself. It's monstrous. I will not let you interfere with my affairs in this way. It's too monstrous.

MAUDE: Well, I thought you would be. And what's more, you ought to be.

CAROLINE: I'll never forgive you. How dare you? How dare you?

ISABELLA: [*At the window.*] Here he is.

CAROLINE: Rex?

ISABELLA: He's just driven up.

MAUDE: I'm not going, Caroline. We must thrash this matter out thoroughly. While Rex is here Isabella and I will have a cup of tea in your boudoir.

CAROLINE: [*Ironically.*] Make yourselves at home, won't you?

MAUDE: Come, Isabella.

CAROLINE: [*Furiously.*] If you'd like an egg to your tea, mind you order it.

[*The two ladies go out. CAROLINE hurriedly looks at herself in the glass, arranges her hair a little, powders her nose, and settles herself down in a becoming attitude with a book. She is careful to arrange her skirt so that it shall make a graceful line. COOPER shows in*
REX CUNNINGHAM.

COOPER: Mr. Cunningham.

[*Exit.*

CAROLINE: [*Very affably.*] How nice of you to come.

REX: I thought I was never going to see you again.

CAROLINE: Good heavens, why?

REX: [*With a shrug of the shoulders.*] Let me congratulate you on your engagement.

CAROLINE: D'you mean that my engagement entails the breaking of our friendship?

REX: Don't you know how I've felt for you ever since I knew you? D'you think I have no heart?

CAROLINE: No, I don't think that. You are romance, youth, passion.

REX: I could bear to think of you as the wife of a man I'd never seen. He was far away, and I knew you didn't care for him. But now it's quite different.

CAROLINE: You've known always that I was deeply attached to Robert.

REX: If you knew how I've suffered.

CAROLINE: Don't, Rex, you break my heart.

REX: And I shall go on suffering. I know myself. I know what tortures I'm capable of. I've got that nature. But what must be, must be. The only thing is, I beseech you not to ask me to go on seeing you.

CAROLINE: But I'm very fond of you.

REX: You say that because you have a kind heart. You'll be happy with the man you love. I shall only be in the way. Say good-bye to me and let me go. I'm seeing you now for the last time. I shall never get over it. My life is blighted. But at all events let me spare you the sight of my torment. Let me suffer in silence and in solitude.

CAROLINE: What would you say if I told you that I'd refused to marry Robert Oldham?

REX: You? But Miss Fulton told me you were engaged.

CAROLINE: She was mistaken.

REX: [*Looking at her blankly.*] My hat!

CAROLINE: [*A little surprised.*] Aren't you pleased?

REX: Why did you refuse him?

CAROLINE: I suppose because I didn't love him enough.

REX: Are you quite sure you're wise?

CAROLINE: I beg your pardon? I didn't expect you to ask me that question!

REX: I'm thinking of your happiness.

CAROLINE: It may be that my happiness lies elsewhere.

REX: [*Not without embarrassment.*] After all, you've known Robert Oldham a great many years, haven't you?

CAROLINE: Not so many as all that.

REX: He's a very good chap. None better. He's by way of being distinguished too. I always feel rather insignificant beside him.

CAROLINE: One might almost think you wanted me to marry him.

REX: It would break my heart. You know that.

CAROLINE: But——

REX: Looking at it entirely from your point of view I can't help seeing it would be the best thing.

CAROLINE: It's nice of you to be so anxious for my welfare.

REX: That has been my first thought ever since I first saw you.

CAROLINE: It's rare to find such unselfishness in a man.

REX: I'm so accustomed to being absolutely wretched.

CAROLINE: [*With a flash of insight.*] Are you sure you don't rather like it?

REX: I? Do you know how many sleepless nights I've spent on your account?

CAROLINE: And I felt so sorry for you, poor dear. Tell me, has nobody ever been in love with you?

REX: I suppose so. But, I don't know why, it's always bored me stiff.

CAROLINE: I'm beginning to see daylight. You thrive on hopeless passion, my poor friend.

REX: I don't know what you mean. If you think that I haven't been perfectly sincere in all I've said to you——

CAROLINE: [*Interrupting.*] Oh, I'm sure you have. But hasn't my greatest attraction been that I didn't return your love?

REX: I never expected to hear *you* say such things to me, Caroline.

CAROLINE: My dear, I don't blame you. We're as we're made. You are the unhappy lover. I was a donkey not to see it before.

REX: You make me feel an awful fool, Caroline.

CAROLINE: Don't grudge me that little bit of satisfaction. By the way, where are you dining to-night?

REX: Isabella asked me to eat a chop with her.

CAROLINE: It crossed my mind that it might be she. Dear Isabella. You'll like her so much as you get to know her more. She has a husband in India and she'll never do anything to cause him any real uneasiness; but she has a very tender heart and an unlimited amount of sympathy.

REX: Caroline, you don't think for a moment——?

CAROLINE: No, but I recommend it. You see, now I've discovered that nothing can distress you more than to have your passion returned, I'm afraid I shan't succeed in being as sympathetic as you have the right to expect.

REX: You're unjust to me, Caroline. It's not my fault if I'm only really happy when I'm utterly miserable.

CAROLINE: I'm so glad I'm not. But it takes all sorts to make a world.

REX: And you know, they never give me a chance. They're quite impossible.

CAROLINE: Who?

REX: Women.

CAROLINE: They will fall on your neck, I suppose. They're affectionate creatures.

REX: They're always wanting to sacrifice themselves.

CAROLINE: I nearly did myself, Rex.

REX: They're so selfish. They never will let a man be self-sacrificing and all that sort of thing. Why shouldn't a

man be an object of pity? I want to deny myself, I want to stand aside, *I can* suffer in silence. I'm made like that.

CAROLINE: Not quite in silence, Rex. But I'm keeping you, and I'm sure you have a hundred things to do. Good-bye.

REX: No one will ever understand me. Good-bye. [*He goes to the door, opens it, and pauses a moment.*] And you know, Caroline, a woman *is* more desirable when she's unattainable.

[*Exit.*]

CAROLINE: [*A sudden light dawning upon her.*] A true word! [*Pause.*] My hat!

[MAUDE FULTON and ISABELLA TRENCH *come in.*]

MAUDE: We heard him go.

CAROLINE: Heavens, I'd forgotten all about you. [*To ISABELLA.*] Well, my dear, you've not been wasting your time with Rex, have you? *He* thinks you have charming blue eyes too.

ISABELLA: Caroline, what do you mean?

CAROLINE: It appears he's dining with you to-night.

ISABELLA: I merely asked him because he seemed unhappy.

CAROLINE: Unhappy? Why, he enjoys being unhappy. I give him to you, Isabella, since you want him.

ISABELLA: [*Outraged.*] Oh!

CAROLINE: You'll just suit him. You'll listen to all his protestations of affection, and you'll weep little salt tears of sympathy when he tells you he adores you. And you'll give him to understand that your husband doesn't appreciate you. And you'll be dreadfully sorry for him. And I can trust you not to go an inch further than is quite safe. You mustn't do that because it'll put him out dreadfully. The last thing he wants is to have his feelings reciprocated.

ISABELLA: [*Beginning to cry.*] I never thought you'd say such things to me.

MAUDE: Caroline, you've asked him to marry you and he's refused.

CAROLINE: Oh, I haven't. Really that's too much. I've never been so insulted. [*She begins to cry also.*] Oh, I hate you, Maude, I hate you!

MAUDE: Caroline!

CAROLINE: You're a spiteful, envious cat.

MAUDE: You've got no right to say such things to me. I've only aimed at your good.

[She begins to cry. They all three sob angrily for a minute, then all three take their bags and pull out their mirrors.]

ISABELLA: Oh, my dear, what a fright I look.

CAROLINE: Good heavens! I look a perfect sight.

MAUDE: Crying doesn't suit me one bit.

[These three speeches are said together, then all three take their puffs and powder their noses. While they are busily engaged COOPER comes in.]

COOPER: Mr. Oldham has called, ma'am.

CAROLINE: Not at home.

COOPER: He said he'd come by appointment, ma'am.

MAUDE: That's quite right. Show him up, Cooper.

COOPER: Very good, miss.

[Exit.]

CAROLINE: What d'you mean, Maude?

MAUDE: I sent for him.

CAROLINE: Abominable woman! I'm speechless! Maude, you abominable woman!

MAUDE: I don't care if you're angry. The matter can't be left like this, and something's got to be done.

CAROLINE: [*Making for the door.*] I won't see him.

MAUDE: But he's here now.

CAROLINE: Get rid of him, then. You think he's charming, Isabella, take him too.

ISABELLA: He'll never go without seeing you.

CAROLINE: Then I'll tell you why I refused him—because he didn't want to marry me. I saw his heart sink as the words were wrung out of him by his sense of decency. He asked me only because he felt he must.

MAUDE: Oh, what nonsense! I oughtn't to have left you alone. You're a pair of children. I dare say he was a little nervous, and I'm sure you were.

CAROLINE: There's no doubt that he was. If you'd seen the amount of whisky he took! Dutch courage to propose to me! Are you going to ask him now to marry me out of pity! I dare say he's already got a ticket for the South Sea Islands in his pocket.

ISABELLA: Everyone knows that Robert has worshipped the ground you trod on for ten years. It's incredible that now, when he can at last achieve his greatest wish, he shouldn't want to.

CAROLINE: You idiot, Isabella, don't you know that the only thing men want is the unattainable?

MAUDE: I suppose you're quite sure that he did propose?

CAROLINE: You may be quite certain that I wouldn't have let him out of the room before he did. I have my self-respect to think of.

MAUDE: Perhaps you didn't make yourself alluring enough.

CAROLINE: I made myself as alluring as I knew how.

MAUDE: You should have waited till the evening. A good dinner and a bottle of champagne have a wonderful effect on the masculine heart.

ISABELLA: And no woman is so attractive that she's not improved by shaded lights and an evening frock.

CAROLINE: I didn't want him to come this morning. You did it. I knew very well that no man feels like marriage before luncheon.

MAUDE: I thought Robert was an exceptional man.

CAROLINE: No man's an exceptional man. You must know that by now.

ISABELLA: What is he doing all this time?

CAROLINE: Making up his mind to face the music. I won't come out of my room till he's gone.

[She flings out of the room. The two ladies are left astounded.]

MAUDE: Well!

ISABELLA: Dear Caroline is rather hard sometimes. She should show more tenderness.

[COOPER ushers in ROBERT OLDHAM and then goes out.]

COOPER: Mr. Oldham.

ROBERT: I just asked Cooper to give me a drink. Is Caroline not here? Good afternoon. *[Silence.]* Is anything the matter? When I came out of court my clerk gave me a message that I was to come at once on a matter of the greatest importance.

MAUDE: I sent the message. I'm not pleased with you, Robert.

ROBERT: How changeable you are. It's only a few hours ago since you insisted on kissing me.

MAUDE: This is no time for flippancy.

ROBERT: My dear Maude, if conscience took a human shape, I am convinced she would take yours. Believe me, nothing is further from me than flippancy.

MAUDE: Then your conscience *is* troubling you.

ROBERT: I never said so. It's perfectly at ease.

MAUDE: In that case your remark was senseless.

ROBERT: [*Desperately.*] Oh, heavens! I was only trying to be funny.

MAUDE: I should have thought you knew enough about cross-examination to realize that it was an extremely damaging admission.

ROBERT: Good God, woman, don't bully me. What is the matter?

MAUDE: [*Impressively.*] What have you done to Caroline?

ROBERT: I? I don't understand what you mean?

MAUDE: When we came here, Isabella and I, to congratulate her, we found Caroline in a state of complete collapse. Isn't that so, Isabella?

ISABELLA: [*A little doubtfully.*] Yes, Maude.

MAUDE: She was crying her eyes out. Her maid told us that she'd had one fainting fit after another. The *sal volatile* bottle was empty. Isn't that so, Isabella?

ISABELLA: [*Very uncomfortably.*] Yes, Maude.

MAUDE: We had to send for the doctor. He says her condition is most alarming, and it'll be a miracle if she escapes brain fever.

ROBERT: Good God!

MAUDE: I repeat, what have you done to Caroline?

ROBERT: Nothing. I asked her to marry me.

MAUDE: Ah! That confirms Caroline's statement, Isabella. And she refused. Weren't you a little surprised?

ROBERT: My dear Maude, surprised isn't the word. I was staggered. I'm reeling under the blow still.

MAUDE: It must have seemed incomprehensible.

ROBERT: Imagine. For ten years I've longed for the moment when I might be able to ask her to be my wife. It has been my dearest hope. There was nothing in the world I wanted more. She shatters all my expectations at a blow. At the moment it seems to me that I have

nothing left to live for. I suppose I shall get over it in time, but . . .

MAUDE: Why don't you ask her again?

ROBERT: She made me understand that her decision was quite irrevocable. And, after all, my pride is deeply hurt. I cannot expose myself a second time to so monstrous a humiliation.

MAUDE: Fiddle!

ROBERT: Really, Maude, I think you might show me some sympathy in the bitterest disappointment of my life.

MAUDE: My dear friend, Caroline refused you because you showed her very plainly that you didn't want to marry her.

ROBERT: Oh, what nonsense! Everyone knows I wanted to marry her.

MAUDE: You asked her as though it was a duty you owed her. A woman of spirit would naturally refuse. I would have refused you myself.

ROBERT: Isabella, everyone knows Maude is a terrible liar. Tell me, is there a word of truth in what she says?

ISABELLA: Perhaps you didn't quite realize that a woman doesn't like these things arranged in too matter-of-fact a way. You should have made love to her. I'm sure you do it very well.

ROBERT: [*Sitting down beside her.*] What makes you think that?

ISABELLA: That is the sort of thing that every woman knows.

ROBERT: What intuition you have, Isabella.

ISABELLA: [*Putting her hand on his.*] I know you love her, Robert.

ROBERT: [*Taking her hand.*] I'm devoted to her.

ISABELLA: Let a charming story have a charming end.

ROBERT: I wonder if she really cares for me, Isabella.

ISABELLA: Oh, how can you doubt it? Women are faithful creatures, Robert.

ROBERT: Fidelity is not the characteristic which I have found most conspicuous in them in my practice at the Bar.

ISABELLA: D'you know that Caroline is jealous of you?

ROBERT: Oh, come; what makes you think that?

ISABELLA: She's furious with me. Of course, I know she's not quite herself to-day, but she's been unkind to me. It appears that you told her I had charming blue eyes.

ROBERT: So you have.

ISABELLA: You ought to have said it to me. I should have understood. I'm afraid she took it amiss.

ROBERT: You would understand anything.

ISABELLA: I suppose I have a natural gift of sympathy. Of course, Caroline is charming, but she *is* a little lacking in tenderness sometimes, don't you think so?

ROBERT: That is your most exquisite trait.

MAUDE: Really, Isabella, I don't know what you think you're doing.

ISABELLA: [*With some asperity.*] My dear, I wish you'd let me do things in my own way.

MAUDE: I can't see that anything you've said for the last five minutes will make it any clearer to Robert that it is his duty to marry Caroline.

ROBERT: Duty! Stern daughter of the voice of God.

MAUDE: You've compromised her. You've got her talked about. There's only one course open to you. You owe it to yourself and you owe it to her. And you owe it to us.

ROBERT: Oh, really. Do you think so?

MAUDE: We can't be deprived now of the satisfaction of seeing you both happy. You've behaved like a gentleman

hitherto; I recommend you to play the rôle with elegance to the end.

ROBERT: [*He thinks it over for a moment. He makes up his mind.*] I'll see Caroline.

MAUDE: We will leave you. Come, Isabella. We have done our duty, and the saints in heaven can do no more.

ISABELLA: Good-bye.

[*He opens the door for them and they go out. He rings the bell. He walks up and down moodily once or twice, but then braces himself; he is an Englishman, and fears no foe. COOPER comes in.*

ROBERT: Will you ask Mrs. Ashley if I could see her for a few minutes?

COOPER: Mrs. Ashley is engaged, sir.

ROBERT: I'll wait till she is free.

COOPER: Very good, sir. [*Exit COOPER. In a moment she comes in again.*] Mrs. Ashley is ill, sir, and unable to see anyone.

ROBERT: I'll wait till she's well.

COOPER: Very good, sir. [*She goes out and in a moment more comes back.*] Mrs. Ashley is dead, sir.

ROBERT: I'll wait till she comes to life. This is the day of judgment, and the last trump is sounding loud and long.

COOPER: Very good, sir.

[*Exit. This brings CAROLINE.*

CAROLINE: Have they gone?

ROBERT: Thank God!

CAROLINE: [*Calling.*] Cooper.

COOPER: [*Coming in.*] Yes, ma'am?

CAROLINE: Put the chain on the door and don't let anyone ~~in~~ in, or I'll give you your notice.

COOPER: Very good, ma'am.

[*Exit.*

CAROLINE: Your message was so pathetic that I had to come, Robert.

ROBERT: Look here, Caroline, you behaved very badly in putting all the blame on me. You didn't so very much want to marry me, did you?

CAROLINE: [*Smiling.*] Not so very much.

ROBERT: Then what's all this nonsense about floods of tears and fainting fits?

CAROLINE: Who told you that?

ROBERT: Maude. She said you were in a state of collapse, and would only escape brain fever by a miracle.

CAROLINE: [*Chuckling.*] You didn't believe it?

ROBERT: No. But I thought you might be up to some monkey trick.

CAROLINE: I bore the blasting of all my hopes with complete fortitude, Robert.

ROBERT: Well, now look here, Caroline, it's no good kicking against the pricks. We've got to marry.

CAROLINE: [*Energetically.*] I'm hanged if we do.

ROBERT: You know, this is only the beginning. We shall be left no peace. Sooner or later we shall be driven to it. We may just as well resign ourselves and bow to the inevitable.

CAROLINE: If I marry it'll be because I want to, not to please my friends.

ROBERT: My dear, I have a large experience of the reasons for which two people marry. They marry from pique, or loneliness, or fear, for money, position, or boredom; because they can't get out of it, or because their friends think it'll be a good thing, because no one has ever asked them before, or because they're afraid of being left on the shelf; but the one reason which infallibly leads to disaster is when they marry because they want to.

CAROLINE: You're only saying that to reassure me.

ROBERT: D'you think Maude and Isabella will give up the struggle? Never. They'll be joined by all your friends, who'll think it very funny that you don't marry, and by all mine, who'll think there's a discreditable reason on my side, by your uncles and aunts, by my nephews and nieces. My dear girl, we haven't a chance.

CAROLINE: I will fight to the last cartridge, Robert.

ROBERT: After all, I dare say we'll jog along well enough.

CAROLINE: [*Vehemently.*] Jog along! jog along! jog along! I don't want to jog along.

ROBERT: You know I'm devoted to you, Caroline.

CAROLINE: I'm devoted to you, Robert.

ROBERT: But I don't mind telling you now that at the first moment the thought of marriage frightened me out of my wits. It meant changing all my habits and forming new ones. It meant giving up my freedom. . . . You don't mind my saying this, do you?

CAROLINE: My dear, I didn't feel very differently myself.

ROBERT: It's not that I want to be a gay dog, but I want to be able to be a gay dog if I want to.

CAROLINE: I know. Don't you know how you feel when you've been a long journey, and your train steams in at night to some strange city that you've never been in before. All the lights are twinkling. And a wonderful excitement seizes you, and you think any adventure may happen to you. It never does, but it always may. Oh, Robert, if you were sitting on the seat opposite me I'd know it never could.

ROBERT: It's no good, Caroline; we're the heroes of romance, you and I. We've got to satisfy the human craving for a happy ending.

CAROLINE: I wish to heaven my husband had never died.

ROBERT: You know, Caroline, perhaps we shall feel quite differently about it when we *are* married.

CAROLINE: What makes you think that?

ROBERT: I knew a man in South Africa who was engaged to a girl in England, and he wasn't able to send for her till they'd been engaged for seven years. He went to meet her at Durban, but just as the boat was coming in his courage failed him, and he turned and ran. She chased him to Cape Town. He fled to Johannesburg. She chased him to Port Elizabeth. He fled to Lorenzo-Marquez. My dear, she chased him up and down the Continent of Africa, and at last she cornered him. She married him out of hand, and ever since he's been the happiest man alive.

CAROLINE: I'm not thinking of you, Robert, I'm thinking entirely of myself.

ROBERT: My dear, in another hour Maude will be on your doorstep.

CAROLINE: The chain is up.

ROBERT: She'll bring a camp-stool and sandwiches.

CAROLINE: Robert, this is intolerable? Is there nothing you can do?

ROBERT: Good heavens, what can I do? I'm a desperate man.

CAROLINE: I don't like to ask you to commit suicide.

ROBERT: That's lucky, because I have no intention of doing so.

CAROLINE: I suppose you wouldn't marry Maude?

ROBERT: No. Certainly not!

CAROLINE: Is there nothing you'll do for me?

ROBERT: I'll marry you.

CAROLINE: Pooh, you're doing that for yourself, not for me.

ROBERT: It's no good quarrelling. We shall have plenty of time for that when we're married.

CAROLINE: D'you know, we've never quarrelled once in all the time we've known one another.

ROBERT: That augurs well for the future, at all events.

CAROLINE: Robert, I don't want to marry you.

ROBERT: Come, my dear, just a little courage. I wouldn't press you if I saw a way out, but there isn't one.

CAROLINE: Are you sure?

ROBERT: Positive. It's the only way.

CAROLINE: It's a far, far better thing that I do than I have ever done before, Robert.

ROBERT: Then it's settled?

CAROLINE: [*With a sigh.*] It's settled.

ROBERT: We'd better get it over quickly, Caroline.

CAROLINE: I suppose nothing is gained by delaying.

ROBERT: It's lucky I didn't resign from those clubs as I talked of doing.

CAROLINE: Why?

ROBERT: Well, it was a mere extravagance, I never went near them; but I shall want them when I am married.

CAROLINE: I thought it was chiefly bachelors who used clubs.

ROBERT: Oh, no; bachelors don't mind staying at home.

CAROLINE: This will make a great change in your life, Robert.

ROBERT: I've always been very domestic. I dare say it'll do me good to be shaken up a bit.

CAROLINE: You spent practically all your evenings here. I'm sure it won't hurt you to see a little more of other people.

ROBERT: We were getting into a groove, Caroline. I dare say it wanted something like this to stir us up. I look forward to the future with considerable pleasure.

CAROLINE: The past was very pleasant, Robert. A *tête-à-tête* will never be the same thing again.

ROBERT: You're thinking of the little suppers we used to have at the Savoy after the play. They were jolly, weren't they?

CAROLINE: And you know, Robert, I never lost the little thrill it gave me to come and dine with you in your house. They were harmless little dinners enough, but there was always a sense of adventure when I took off my cloak in your hall.

ROBERT: By the way, what are you going to do about getting rid of your house?

CAROLINE: [*Astounded.*] I'm not going to get rid of my house.

ROBERT: My dear, we don't want two.

CAROLINE: Of course not. I naturally supposed you'd sell yours.

ROBERT: Why? I've had my house for twenty years. I'm very much attached to it. You've only got a lease.

CAROLINE: That's got nothing to do with it. I've just had it redecorated. I've spent a fortune on my bathroom.

ROBERT: You're not going to ask me to have my bath in a futurist bathroom. I never feel my best before breakfast as it is.

CAROLINE: I'm sorry you don't like my bathroom. But that's a matter of taste.

ROBERT: Personally, I don't see what anyone can want more than plain white tiles. It's clean, sanitary and cheerful.

CAROLINE: [*Beginning to be vexed.*] Oh, of course you always think your own things are better than anybody else's. Your bathroom is just like a tube station. I really can't see myself having my bath in it. I should be afraid all the time that a young man was going to pop in and say: Next station—Marble Arch!

ROBERT: My dear child, you must be sensible. It's perfectly obvious that my house is a much nicer one than yours.

CAROLINE: [*Sharply.*] I don't agree with you at all.

ROBERT: [*Impatiently.*] Of course, if you won't listen to reason, there's nothing more to be said.

CAROLINE: I tell you frankly that nothing will induce me to leave this house.

ROBERT: Really, this is sheer obstinacy. There's no room for me here. There's not even a room that I can make into a study.

CAROLINE: Oh, yes, there is. There's that very nice little room behind the dining-room.

ROBERT: [*Indignantly.*] It looks out on a blank wall.

CAROLINE: That's just why I thought it would do so well for a study. There'll be nothing to distract your thoughts.

ROBERT: You've told me a hundred times you could do nothing with it—it was like an ice-box in winter and like a furnace in summer. Really, if you have no more affection for me than that . . .

CAROLINE: It isn't a matter of affection, it's a matter of commonsense. Your house is very nice for a bachelor . . .

ROBERT: [*Interrupting.*] Thank you.

CAROLINE: But it's quite unsuitable for a woman. There are no cupboards.

ROBERT: Now you're *making* difficulties, Caroline. Cupboards can be built.

CAROLINE: And which room have you settled for my boudoir? The coal-cellar? It's preposterous.

ROBERT: [*With temper.*] I'm not going to argue the matter, Caroline. I've made up my mind and there's an end of it.

CAROLINE: [*Quite decidedly.*] I happen to have made up my mind too.

ROBERT: When I was waiting for you just now I decided exactly how to arrange matters. You shall have the best bedroom, of course.

CAROLINE: It hasn't any sun, I know it.

ROBERT: [*With dignity.*] It is the room that my poor Aunt Charlotte died in, Caroline.

CAROLINE: That doesn't make it any pleasanter for me to live in.

ROBERT: My dear Caroline, I cannot understand your attitude.

CAROLINE: It's quite simple. I'm pleased with my house and I'm going to stick to it.

ROBERT: It's fortunate that I'm the most patient man in the world. It's obvious that a woman comes to her husband's house.

CAROLINE: I don't see why at all.

ROBERT: My dear, it's one of the best-established customs of the human race. We have Biblical authority for it. A woman is enjoined to forsake all and follow her husband.

CAROLINE: You don't know what you're talking about. Before you quote the Bible I recommend you to read it.

ROBERT: [*Fuming.*] Really, Caroline, I must protest against the tone you're taking up. I am discussing the matter in the most friendly spirit.

CAROLINE: [*Furious.*] Surely you're not going to accuse me of being acrimonious. You said just now we'd never quarrelled. Believe me, it isn't because you haven't given me abundant provocation.

ROBERT: I think we'll resume the conversation when you're a little calmer, Caroline. You'll only say things now which you'll regret later.

CAROLINE: Don't think for an instant you can impress me by being patronizing, Robert. I have no wish to resume the conversation. I've already said all I had to say.

ROBERT: The great thing is that we should clearly understand one another. I am prepared to gratify all your whims, however unreasonable they may be, and heaven knows, for the most part they're unreasonable enough; but this is a matter of principle. I mean to begin as I mean to go on. I wish you to put this house in the agent's hands at once.

CAROLINE: I shall do nothing of the sort.

ROBERT: Caroline, I have put my request in the most courteous and obliging way possible; but I do not expect it to be disregarded.

CAROLINE: I presume you are talking for your own entertainment; you're certainly not talking for mine.

ROBERT: Let me make myself quite clear, Caroline. I refuse to come and live in this house.

CAROLINE: That is unfortunate, because nothing will induce me to come and live in yours.

ROBERT: Perhaps you'd like to think the matter over.

CAROLINE: No, thank you. I've quite made up my mind. If you want to marry me you must come and live here.

ROBERT: I will not marry you unless you consent to live in my house.

CAROLINE: Very well. That settles it.

ROBERT: Take care, Caroline. I've proposed twice now. I shall not propose a third time.

CAROLINE: I wouldn't marry you now if you crawled on your bended knees from the Tower of London to Buckingham Palace.

ROBERT: In that case the marriage is off, Caroline.

CAROLINE: I was willing to sacrifice myself, but it's a little too much to expect that all the sacrificing should be on my side.

ROBERT: Sacrifice, you call it. I was marrying you out of pure good nature.

CAROLINE: Good heavens, what an escape I've had! I might have been chained to you for life.

ROBERT: It shows what women are. Even the ablest men are children in their hands. I've known you ten years, Caroline, and this is the first time you've shown yourself in your true colours.

CAROLINE: I've always known that you were selfish, vain and dyspeptic; but I shut my eyes to it. I've been punished. I didn't like you the first time I saw you. It's always a mistake not to trust to first impressions.

ROBERT: In that case, I'm surprised that you threw yourself at my head in the way you did.

CAROLINE: Thank heaven, my eyes are opened at last! And as to throwing myself at your head, I would never have looked at you if you hadn't pestered me with your attentions.

ROBERT: [*Ironically.*] I suppose you were sorry for me?

CAROLINE: No, but I knew you were *safe*. And I can't imagine anything more ridiculous in a man than that.

ROBERT: [*Boiling.*] Oh! oh! I will never speak to you again, Caroline.

CAROLINE: You don't think I wish to continue our acquaintance, do you?

ROBERT: Have you anything more to say to me?

CAROLINE: Only this. Perhaps you'd like to meditate over it. If you were the only man in the world I wouldn't marry you.

ROBERT: Caroline, I can truthfully say that if I had to choose between the altar and the scaffold I would undoubtedly choose the scaffold. Good-bye.

CAROLINE: Good riddance! [*He is going to the door. Suddenly the telephone bell rings. They both give a gasp. They look at one another in dismay. The bell rings firmly.*] It's Maude.

ROBERT: Good God! I'd forgotten about her.

CAROLINE: What shall I do?

ROBERT: I'm off, Caroline.

CAROLINE: You coward! You can't leave me like that.

ROBERT: Well, you'd better answer it.

CAROLINE: You answer it, Robert. You're a man.

ROBERT: I daren't, Caroline.

[Meanwhile the bell rings persistently, angrily.]

CAROLINE: For goodness' sake, stop it ringing!

ROBERT: It'll never stop till you answer.

CAROLINE: I wish to heaven I'd never had the telephone put in.

ROBERT: I always disliked Maude.

CAROLINE: She's a detestable woman!

ROBERT: I can't imagine why you ever put up with her.

CAROLINE: I hate her, I hate her! *[Desperately.]* For goodness' sake, stop that ringing!

ROBERT: Take the receiver off.

CAROLINE: You take it off, Robert.

ROBERT: Caroline.

CAROLINE: Oh, Robert, if you've ever loved me.

ROBERT: I'll do it.

[He creeps towards the table as though it were a beast that might bite; he stalks it carefully, stealthily, then with a sudden bound leaps on to the telephone and snatches the receiver off. CAROLINE gives a shriek. He bounds back and they are close together. She clings to him. They tremble with fear.]

ROBERT: I've done it.

CAROLINE: Don't leave me, Robert.

ROBERT: No, I won't leave you.

CAROLINE: Oh, Robert, I shall never forget this.

ROBERT: She thinks we're listening. She's talking at her end now. I expect she's getting angry. She's making a scene.

CAROLINE: Oh, Robert, I wonder what she's saying.

ROBERT: Can't you guess?

CAROLINE: Thank God, the chain is on the door! She'll be round in ten minutes.

[They look at one another in dismay.]

ROBERT: It's no good, Caroline. We've got to get married.

CAROLINE: I know. But what is to be done? You must think of some way out, Robert.

ROBERT: There's only one. We must give up both houses and take a new one.

CAROLINE: But I like my house, Robert.

ROBERT: I like mine.

CAROLINE: It'll be a wrench for both of us. That's some comfort.

ROBERT: Our first sacrifice on the altar of connubial bliss.

CAROLINE: You'll let me decorate the new house, Robert.

ROBERT: All except the bathroom. Give me that as a wedding-present.

CAROLINE: I tell you what, we'll each have a bathroom. You can have yours like a tube station.

ROBERT: And you shall have one like an attack of gastritis.

CAROLINE: *[With a sigh.]* If it's got to be done it had better be done at once. I'll ring up the house agent.

[She takes up the telephone-book and looks out an address.]

ROBERT: Shall we be married by special licence?

CAROLINE: I haven't an idea.

ROBERT: I think I'll just go round to the club. Petersen is sure to be there, and he's had a lot of experience in these matters. There's no reason why I shouldn't ask him that.

CAROLINE: Oh, how did the divorce go?

ROBERT: First rate. I think it'll last for four or five days. Neither of them will have a shred of reputation by the time it's over.

CAROLINE: [*At the telephone.*] Mayfair 148. Are you Messrs. Gaskell and Birch? I want to let my house. . . . I can't say it all on the telephone. Will you send somebody round. No. At once. Where? Oh, Mrs. Ashley, Curzon Terrace, Regent's Park.

[She puts down the receiver.]

ROBERT: Is there anything more you want to say to me? I'll be back presently to tell you what I've found out.

CAROLINE: Before dinner?

ROBERT: Oh, yes. By the way, about dinner. Don't you think we need cheering up a bit? I'm afraid it would be rather dull dining by ourselves.

CAROLINE: I think it would rather.

ROBERT: Why don't you ask Isabella?

CAROLINE: Rex Cunningham is dining with her. I might ask him too, and we can play bridge.

ROBERT: Oh, yes; that'll be jolly. [*CAROLINE takes out her patience cards.*] What are you going to do now?

CAROLINE: Oh, I'll have a game of patience.

ROBERT: Yes, do. It'll rest you.

[He goes towards the door.]

CAROLINE: Robert.

ROBERT: Yes?

CAROLINE: It's emeralds I like, you know.

ROBERT: I'm glad you reminded me.

[He goes out. She begins to put out her patience cards.]

THE THIRD ACT

SCENE: *The same. It is ten minutes later.*

[CAROLINE is finishing her game of patience. COOPER shows in DR. CORNISH.

COOPER: Dr. Cornish.

[*Exit.*

CAROLINE: This is a joyful surprise. I've torn up your prescription.

DR. CORNISH: How on earth do you expect a doctor to make a living if you won't take medicine! You'll remain perfectly well.

CAROLINE: You didn't talk like that just now.

DR. CORNISH: That was a visit. This is a call.

CAROLINE: I hesitate to ask his reason.

DR. CORNISH: You need not. I was just going to tell you. I'm devoured with curiosity.

CAROLINE: That isn't one of the failings that middle-age eradicates?

DR. CORNISH: Tell me, which has won, romance or common-sense? Are you going to marry Robert Oldham or Rex Cunningham?

CAROLINE: My dear doctor, Rex Cunningham is a mere boy.

DR. CORNISH: Oh, I've known those marriages turn out very well. My last cook married the lad who came in to do the boots and knives, and they're very happy. At least I haven't heard anything to the contrary.

CAROLINE: I wonder how she worked it.

DR. CORNISH: The policy of nag, I believe.

CAROLINE: I've promised to marry Robert Oldham.

DR. CORNISH: Then it only remains for me to congratulate you.

CAROLINE: One comfort is that my friends will have to give me wedding-presents. I get back on them that way, don't I?

DR. CORNISH: I'm sure you'll be very happy.

CAROLINE: [*Tartly.*] I'm sure I shall be nothing of the sort.

DR. CORNISH: Don't jump down my throat.

CAROLINE: You know I'm very fond of Robert. I don't want to lose him.

DR. CORNISH: Is that inevitable?

CAROLINE: Haven't you noticed that other people's bread-and-butter is always much nicer than your own? Robert is like that. He always prefers somebody else's fireside. If I marry him, where is he going to spend his evenings?

DR. CORNISH: I only see one way out of it. You must marry somebody else.

CAROLINE: I believe it's the only way I can keep Robert. It's very hard if you come to think of it.

DR. CORNISH: Especially on the innocent victim.

CAROLINE: Whom d'you think I'd better marry?

DR. CORNISH: Let us examine your circle of friends and see who would meet your requirements.

CAROLINE: [*With a twinkle in her eye.*] I don't think it ought to be anyone too young.

DR. CORNISH: No, a man of a certain age.

CAROLINE: I rather like grey hair, don't you?

DR. CORNISH: A professional man, of course.

CAROLINE: Oh, yes, I'd like him to have interests in common with Robert.

DR. CORNISH: He oughtn't to be a barrister. It would be such a bore for you if they talked shop together.

CAROLINE: I don't see why he shouldn't be a doctor.

DR. CORNISH: Yes, I don't think that's a bad idea. And of course if he had a pretty large practice it would keep him busy, wouldn't it?

CAROLINE: Yes. Now, there's only one thing more. I think he ought to be a great friend of Roberts.

DR. CORNISH: Obviously that would make matters much simpler. Now, let us think. I wonder who there is.

CAROLINE: Don't bother, Dr. Cornish. I've already made up my mind.

DR. CORNISH: God bless my soul, you're very quick.

CAROLINE: *You* are going to marry me.

DR. CORNISH: [*With great decision.*] No, I'm not.

CAROLINE: Now, my dear friend, don't be unreasonable. You meet the requirements in a manner that I can only describe as miraculous.

DR. CORNISH: My dear lady, let us put things in their places. I am your medical attendant, not an aspirant to your hand.

CAROLINE: Oh, but you said just now that this was a call and not a visit.

DR. CORNISH: We can easily settle that. I will charge you half a guinea, and that makes it a visit.

CAROLINE: I thought you were a man of the world.

DR. CORNISH: If that means getting out of an awkward predicament gracefully, I flatter myself I am.

CAROLINE: No, it doesn't. It means accepting the inevitable with elegance.

DR. CORNISH: The inevitable is only what a fool has not the wit to avoid.

CAROLINE: Believe me, when a woman really makes up her mind to marry a man nothing on God's earth can save him.

DR. CORNISH: No one is more conscious than I of your advantages. I am sure any man would be lucky to get you, but you know I'm very modest. I don't deserve so much happiness.

CAROLINE: Your diffidence gives you a new charm in my eyes. It shall be the object of my life to prove you mistaken.

DR. CORNISH: I have too much affection for you to consent for an instant to your wasting your efforts on so unworthy an object.

CAROLINE: Ah, then you have an affection for me.

DR. CORNISH: A purely medical affection, if I may so put it.

CAROLINE: Good heavens, it sounds like mumps.

DR. CORNISH: You know, you should have had that prescription made up. I told you you needed soothing.

CAROLINE: I find *you* soothing. That's one of the reasons why I consent to marry you.

DR. CORNISH: Don't let us lose sight of the point that I haven't asked you.

CAROLINE: Well, do.

DR. CORNISH: You might accept me.

CAROLINE: I undoubtedly should.

DR. CORNISH: Then I don't think I'll risk it.

CAROLINE: You'd better. It will only be embarrassing for both of us if I have to make the proposal.

DR. CORNISH: I can always say no.

CAROLINE: Oh, but I wouldn't take a refusal.

DR. CORNISH: You're a perfect monster of determination.

CAROLINE: When I think of Robert's great affection for me, I'm prepared for anything.

DR. CORNISH: I don't wish to seem brutal, but I really must tell you that in my heart of hearts I am completely indifferent to Robert's affection for you.

CAROLINE: I thought he was a great friend of yours.

DR. CORNISH: He is.

CAROLINE: Then you must want to make him happy. I'm sure he'd like you to be my husband.

DR. CORNISH: You're putting me in a very embarrassing position.

CAROLINE: I wonder if you know how very pleasant it is to be married.

DR. CORNISH: I'm sure it's delightful for those who like it.

CAROLINE: There are a hundred ways in which a woman can make a man comfortable.

DR. CORNISH: There are a thousand and one in which she can do the reverse.

CAROLINE: I always think there's something rather cold and cheerless about a house that lacks a woman's touch.

DR. CORNISH: How true! I feel quite sure that if you put that before Robert as persuasively as you have before me he will realize how very lucky he is to be going to marry you.

CAROLINE: Pray, don't be flippant. *You* are going to marry me.

DR. CORNISH: No.

CAROLINE: Yes.

DR. CORNISH: [*With a smile.*] After all, you can't force me.

CAROLINE: I can make life intolerable to you unless you do.

DR. CORNISH: You're a very dangerous woman.

CAROLINE: But you're a very brave man.

DR. CORNISH: I can't help thinking that Robert would look upon it as a very unfriendly action on my part.

CAROLINE: Only for a moment. He'd soon realize that we'd only had his happiness in view.

DR. CORNISH: If you find a husband so essential, why were you so careless as to lose your last?

CAROLINE: I never knew what a useful article it was about a house.

DR. CORNISH: It doesn't inspire confidence, you know.

CAROLINE: I'll be more careful with you.

DR. CORNISH: [*With a chuckle.*] It would be an awful sell for him, wouldn't it?

CAROLINE: Can't you see his face when you tell him?

DR. CORNISH: [*Considering her.*] Of course, you're a very charming woman;

CAROLINE: People have thought so.

DR. CORNISH: [*Impulsively.*] I think Robert's a fool. He should never have hesitated.

CAROLINE: He shouldn't have, should he?

DR. CORNISH: It would serve him jolly well right if someone stepped over his head and seized the opportunity that he hadn't the courage to take.

CAROLINE: I'd rather you spoke of me as a prize than as an opportunity. That suggests a remnant at a sale.

[*He gives her a long look. There is a twinkle in his eye.*]

DR. CORNISH: Caroline, will you be my wife?

CAROLINE: I? [*For a moment she is surprised, but she quickly recovers herself.*] I hardly know what to say to you. This is so unexpected. It never entered my head that you—that you cared for me. [*She takes the plunge with determination.*] Yes, I will be your wife.

DR. CORNISH: I've always thought it would be very nice to have someone on whom I could experiment with new medicines when they're put on the market.

CAROLINE: [*Somewhat taken aback.*] Oh! How have you managed up till now?

DR. CORNISH: [*Blandly.*] I've generally tried them on the maids, but they have no interest in science; they will give me their notice. But, of course, you couldn't do that, could you?

CAROLINE: I haven't got a very great interest in science myself.

DR. CORNISH: Oh, but it'll come. I'm sure you won't hesitate at a trifling inconvenience when you realize how much it means to me.

CAROLINE: [*Pursing her lips.*] If there are any other duties which you expect of me, I hope you'll tell me at once.

DR. CORNISH: I don't know that there are. Of course, you'll have to lead a very retired life. People don't much like meeting their doctor's wife; they're always afraid she knows too much about their insides. In fact, the most desirable thing is that she should be a confirmed invalid.

CAROLINE: I imagine that would follow almost automatically on a course of medicines whose properties you were entirely unfamiliar with.

DR. CORNISH: That is one of those admirable contrivances which confirm one in the belief that the world is not a matter of pure chance.

CAROLINE: [*Shaking off the doubts which his remarks have suggested.*] Oh, well, I don't care. When I think of the faces they'll all make when you tell them the news, everything is worth while.

DR. CORNISH: I see the joke from your point of view much more than from mine.

CAROLINE: Isabella will think it very touching and she'll probably kiss you.

DR. CORNISH: She's a very pretty young woman.

CAROLINE: Maude will think I've behaved abominably, and she'll tell me so with gusto. But Robert—I wonder what Robert will look like. I'm going to telephone to Isabella. [*She touches the bell.*] They've spent a happy day here to please themselves. Now it's my turn.

DR. CORNISH: Are you expecting Robert?

CAROLINE: Yes. Dear Robert. He went to buy me a ring.
[COOPER comes in.] Cooper, ring up Mrs. Trench and ask her to come round at once. I have something very important to tell her.

COOPER: Very good, ma'am.

Exit.

CAROLINE: Now listen. Maude, if I know her, is on her way to this house. I'm only surprised that she hasn't come already. Robert can't be long. Then there's Isabella. You mustn't say a word till they're all here. Then——

DR. CORNISH: Yes, what then?

CAROLINE: Then you'll stand here and you'll get into an appropriate attitude. You'll try and look merry and bright, won't you?

DR. CORNISH: Oh, d'you think so? I should have thought an air of stern resolution would be more to the point.

CAROLINE: Remember that you've loved me in secret for seven years.

DR. CORNISH: It's the seven which seems to me a little difficult to indicate on my face.

CAROLINE: Then you'll say to them: My dear friends, I have a communication to impart which will be in the nature of a surprise to all of you. Caroline has consented to be my wife. And then we'll see what happens.

DR. CORNISH: I see.

CAROLINE: What d'you think will happen?

[Enter COOPER, followed by MISS FULTON.]

COOPER: Miss Fulton.

[Exit.]

MAUDE: Well, Caroline. Oh, how do you do again, Dr. Cornish? [To CAROLINE.] Is anything the matter with you?

CAROLINE: [Mysteriously.] No. Dr. Cornish hasn't come to see me about my health.

DR. CORNISH: No.

MAUDE: Where is Robert?

CAROLINE: He's gone out.

MAUDE: You haven't sent him away?

CAROLINE: He did what you wished, Maude.

MAUDE: [*With triumph.*] Ah. I knew it only needed a little firmness and everything could be put right.

CAROLINE: Maude, something has happened which puts an entirely different complexion on things.

MAUDE: [*Suddenly suspicious.*] What on earth do you mean?
Dr. Cornish!

DR. CORNISH: All in good time, my dear lady.

MAUDE: Isn't everything all right?

CAROLINE: It depends on what you mean by all right.

MAUDE: My dear . . .

CAROLINE: You must wait till Robert comes. It's only fair that nobody should know before he does. [*To DR. CORNISH.*] Don't you agree with me?

DR. CORNISH: Perfectly.

MAUDE: By the way, have you had an answer to the telegram you sent to Nairobi?

CAROLINE: No, I haven't yet.

[*COOPER comes in to announce ROBERT OLDHAM and then goes out.*]

COOPER: Mr. Oldham!

CAROLINE: [*Cordially.*] Ah, Robert, I've been wondering what had happened to you.

ROBERT: Good God, there's Maude.

CAROLINE: And Dr. Cornish.

ROBERT: Hullo! I've not seen you for a long time. What d'you think of the news?

CAROLINE: Dr. Cornish has some news, too, Robert.

MAUDE: If I am not told it soon I shall have an attack of hysterics.

ROBERT: I've seen Petersen, Caroline.

CAROLINE: You shall tell me what he said later.

ROBERT: You're very strange, Caroline.

CAROLINE: You must have a moment's patience.

MAUDE: Why?

CAROLINE: I want Isabella to be here. She takes such an interest in me I feel that she, too, should know something that makes so great a difference to my future.

ROBERT: [*Somewhat irritably.*] I don't understand. I hate mysteries.

DR. CORNISH: I have something to tell you which is very important, but Mrs. Ashley does not wish me to break it to you till all her friends are gathered round her.

CAROLINE: Exactly.

MAUDE: I like mysteries, but I hate suspense.

ROBERT: Oh, Cornish, has Caroline told you what we've decided on?

DR. CORNISH: She's told me that you wish to marry her.

ROBERT: You know I've been devoted to her for years.

CAROLINE: We need not go into that now, Robert.

MAUDE: I'm beginning to grow very uneasy.

[*Enter COOPER.*

COOPER: Mrs. Trench and Mr. Cunningham.

[*They enter.*

CAROLINE: At last.

ISABELLA: What is the matter, Caroline? Fortunately Rex was at my door. He was just going to take me for a drive in the Park.

CAROLINE: His two-seater is so useful, isn't it?

ISABELLA: So I made him bring me here at once. Has anything happened? Your message has made me dreadfully anxious.

REX: We're both dreadfully anxious, Caroline.

CAROLINE: What is it, Cooper?

COOPER: There's a gentleman called. He says he has an appointment with you, ma'am.

CAROLINE: [*Taking the card.*] Gaskell and Birch. Oh, I know; they're the house agents.

ROBERT: Of course. You rang them up just before I left you. Cooper can take him round the house.

CAROLINE: Thank the gentleman for coming, Cooper, and say I'm sorry to have troubled him. I shan't be wanting to let my house just yet after all.

ROBERT: [*Astounded.*] Caroline!

CAROLINE: That's all, Cooper.

COOPER: Very good, ma'am.

[*Exit.*]

ROBERT: What is the meaning of this? You agreed that you would get rid of your house. If you've changed your mind, Caroline . . .

CAROLINE: Wait one moment, Robert. Now, dear Doctor, I think the time has arrived. Will you tell them—everything?

DR. CORNISH: [*Stepping forward.*] Yes. My dear friends, I have a communication to impart which will be in the nature of a surprise to all of you.

ISABELLA: I can simply hear my heart beating.

DR. CORNISH: [*Looking steadily at CAROLINE.*] Stephen Ashley walked out of this room exactly five minutes ago.

ALL: What?

[*No one is more taken aback than CAROLINE. DR. CORNISH watches her with extreme, but inward, entertainment.*]

DR. CORNISH: I have seen him with my own eyes. He's no more dead than I am.

REX: My hat!

ISABELLA: I don't understand. Caroline!

CAROLINE: No one can be more flabbergasted than I.

DR. CORNISH: It's not the first time his death has been announced. When I came in and found him I was hardly surprised.

CAROLINE: I don't know if I'm standing on my head or on my heels.

DR. CORNISH: He can very easily live for twenty years.

CAROLINE: D'you think he will?

DR. CORNISH: If proper care is taken of him.

MAUDE: My poor Caroline, what a disappointment for you.

DR. CORNISH: You must all of you be very gentle with Caroline. [*To CAROLINE.*] I can only offer you my sincerest sympathy.

CAROLINE: You're not going?

DR. CORNISH: [*With a smile.*] I'm going to leave you to deal with the situation as best you can.

CAROLINE: [*Under her breath.*] You brute!

DR. CORNISH: If a man of the world is one who can get out of an awkward predicament gracefully. . . . Good-bye.
[*He goes out quickly.*]

ISABELLA: You're bearing it magnificently.

CAROLINE: [*Trying not to laugh.*] D'you think so? It's been an awful strain. I've just about reached the end of my strength. I think I'm going to faint.

ISABELLA: Robert, open the window. You look a perfect wreck.

CAROLINE: [*Beginning to giggle.*] No, I'm going to have a nerve storm.

MAUDE: Don't let yourself go, Caroline. Don't let yourself go.

CAROLINE: [*Gurgling.*] I can't help it.

[She starts laughing. Her laughter grows louder and louder. They all press round her.]

ALL: Caroline, Caroline.

CAROLINE: It was such a shock!

ISABELLA: Where are my smelling salts?

MAUDE: How stupid of me!

[The two ladies hurriedly take salts from their bags and put them under CAROLINE'S nose while she helplessly laughs and laughs.]

MAUDE: Here are some. Slap her hands.

[The two men take her hands and slap the palms.]

ROBERT: Stop it, Caroline, stop it!

ISABELLA: Let's send for the doctor.

MAUDE: What's the good of a doctor? I know exactly what to do. Slap her feet.

CAROLINE: I won't have my feet slapped.

MAUDE: Don't pay any attention to what she says.

[While the men continue slapping her hands the ladies slap her feet. CAROLINE laughs uproariously. At last she is exhausted.]

CAROLINE: Oh, dear!

MAUDE: Now she's getting better. I knew the best thing was to slap her feet. If that doesn't stop it, then the thing is to wrap her in a rug and roll her up and down the floor.

CAROLINE: Maude, you cat! Oh, I'm beginning to feel better.

ROBERT: After all, one can't be surprised, can one?

MAUDE: Good heavens, if my husband suddenly appeared like that I should fall down in a fit.

REX: I didn't know you had a husband.

MAUDE: I haven't. That's why it would be such a terrible shock.

ISABELLA: Now you must tell us everything, Caroline.

CAROLINE: There's nothing to tell.

MAUDE: Nonsense. How did he come in?

CAROLINE: On his feet.

MAUDE: Don't be silly. What did he do? What did he say?
What is he up to? Where is he going?

CAROLINE: Oh!

*[This is a long-drawn sound as she realizes what she is in for
and what she must invent.]*

ROBERT: Don't worry her. Hasn't she been through enough
already, poor child?

CAROLINE: How good you are to me, Robert!

MAUDE: It can't hurt you just to give us the bare facts,
Caroline.

CAROLINE: Sit down, then, and I will tell you all.

*[They seat themselves on chairs, two on each side of her,
eager for a full account.]*

ROBERT: Now don't excite yourself, Caroline. I beseech
you to be calm.

MAUDE: Hold your tongue, Robert.

CAROLINE: Well, I was sitting down quite calmly playing a
game of patience. Robert had just left me.

ROBERT: On what an errand!

MAUDE: I know. You had arranged to be married. I saw it
at once in Robert's look. My poor Robert!

ROBERT: *[Simply.]* I had told Caroline I couldn't live without
her. She promised to be mine.

CAROLINE: He went out to buy a ring. I was wondering if it
would be a cabochon.

ROBERT: *[Gloomily.]* Would you like to see?

[He takes out of his pocket a large emerald ring.]

CAROLINE: Oh, Robert, what a beauty! It looks frightfully
expensive.

ROBERT: Oh, a mere song. I wonder if they'll take it back.

CAROLINE: Don't bother about that, Robert. I will keep it as a memento of our short engagement.

[ROBERT'S face falls.]

ISABELLA: What a charming idea, Caroline!

ROBERT: [*With a hollow laugh.*] There's no one like Caroline to have charming ideas like that.

MAUDE: Go on, Caroline.

CAROLINE: I only wanted a seven to get my patience out. I drew a ten of clubs, a three of spades. I don't believe I shall get it, I said. Suddenly Cooper opened the door and said a gentleman wanted to see me.

ALL: Yes, yes!

[*They draw their chairs a little closer.*]

CAROLINE: I thought it was the house agent.

ROBERT: Of course. You rang him up just before I left.

CAROLINE: Oh, Robert, I want to tell you that I thought it over. It seemed cruel to make you sell your dear little house. After all, a woman should cleave to her husband. I had made up my mind to get rid of this one, and come and live in yours.

ROBERT: Caroline, were you ready to do that for me?

THE OTHERS: Go on, Caroline.

CAROLINE: I didn't hesitate. I said to Cooper: Show the gentleman up. I went on with my patience. Ah, I said, there's the seven at last! I raised my eyes, and there was my husband standing before me.

ALL: Oh! . . .

CAROLINE: [*Dramatically.*] You, I said. Yes, he said. Not dead? I said. No, he said.

MAUDE: It's the most exciting thing I've ever heard in my life.

ISABELLA: What did you do then?

CAROLINE: [*Deliberately.*] I asked him to sit down.

ROBERT: That was splendid. You always had presence of mind, Caroline. I like that. You asked him to sit down.

CAROLINE: I wanted to gain time. I was all in a flutter.

MAUDE: Of course, I think it was monstrous of him to come here at all.

CAROLINE: He did it in kindness, Maude. He saw the notice in *The Times* this morning, and he thought I might be anxious about him. He said he felt the only thing to do was to come here himself and tell me the announcement was premature.

ISABELLA: But, then, what is the explanation of it?

CAROLINE: The explanation? I'm just coming to that.

ROBERT: Really the papers ought to be more carefull

MAUDE: Go on, Caroline; we're simply hanging on your words.

CAROLINE: I'm not sure, but I think I'm going to have another nerve storm.

MAUDE: Get the hearthrug, Rex. That'll just do to roll her up in.

CAROLINE: No, don't bother. I think it's going off. The explanation is perfectly simple. Just give me a moment to collect my thoughts. You know. I'm quite dazed after all I've gone through to-day.

ISABELLA: Take your time, dearest.

CAROLINE: Well, I may as well confess to you now that poor Stephen has always been very wild. It appears that he was in with a man called Brown, and they'd been connected in some deal or other which I'm afraid was dreadfully shady. Of course, I didn't ask for details. It's all rather vague in my mind.

ROBERT: That's only natural.

MAUDE: Oh, be quiet, Robert.

CAROLINE: They had a row, and Brown bolted with all Stephen's belongings, his papers, his kit, everything. Then I don't know exactly what happened. Brown seems to have been taken suddenly ill. When he was brought to the hospital he was unconscious. They found Stephen's papers on him and naturally concluded he was Stephen.

MAUDE: I see it all. It's a thing that might happen to anybody.

CAROLINE: [*Eagerly.*] Yes, isn't it? Stephen saw the announcement in this morning's Times. He grasped the whole situation. I don't think he's sorry the authorities in East Africa should believe him dead. He's made up his mind to go to Texas. Stephen Ashley is dead to everyone but me.

MAUDE: At all events, you've seen him for the last time, Caroline. That's something to be thankful for.

CAROLINE: I suppose so.

ROBERT: What do you mean by that? Aren't you sure of it?

CAROLINE: There's one other thing I must tell you. I hardly know how to say it. He still loves me.

REX: Caroline.

CAROLINE: He asked me to go to Texas.

ALL: You!

CAROLINE: He's going to start a new life. He said I should give him confidence in himself. He implored me to go with him.

ROBERT: But of course you refused, Caroline?

CAROLINE: I was obliged to refuse. Then he said that I would be an inspiration to him. He would do everything in the world to make amends for the past. He would make himself a new man, and then he would come back for me.

ISABELLA: It's really very beautiful.

ROBERT: And where do I come in?

CAROLINE: I can never marry you, Robert.

ROBERT: Caroline, you fill me with anguish. . . . I must be alone for a moment. I don't want to be unmanly.

[He gets up and walks slowly to the window. He stands there struggling with his emotions. REX is sunk in blank wretchedness.]

MAUDE: Well, Isabella, we did all *we* could. We at all events have nothing to reproach ourselves with.

ISABELLA: Poor Robert. My heart bleeds for him. There's something singularly awe-inspiring in the sight of a strong man wrestling with his emotion.

MAUDE: It's not often that I confess myself beaten, but this time I really am at a loss. Good-bye, Caroline. I'll ring up this evening to see how you are.

CAROLINE: Good-bye, dearest. I can never thank you enough for all you've done for me to-day.

[They kiss, and Miss FULTON goes out.]

ISABELLA: I must leave you too, Caroline, but I'd just like to say a word or two to Robert before I go. It's just at these times that a man values a woman's sympathy.

CAROLINE: Oh, do, Isabella. I know what a heart you have. *[ISABELLA goes up to ROBERT and puts her hand gently on his arm. He heaves a sigh and gently pats her hand. She looks up at him softly. They step out on to the balcony. CAROLINE and REX have watched the little comedy.]* At it again. Dear Isabella, she's so sympathetic.

REX: *[Gloomily.]* If there's anyone in want of sympathy now it's me.

CAROLINE: Is anything the matter?

REX: Can *you* ask me that? Oh, Caroline, everything is the matter. I love you.

CAROLINE: Oh, you mustn't say that to me now, Rex—so loud.

REX: This changes everything.

CAROLINE: I suppose it does. I never thought of it.

REX: You never thought of me at all. Oh, Caroline, you must be quite heartless. Has anyone ever loved you as unselfishly as I have?

CAROLINE: Now that I have one man with a marriage certificate in his hand, so to speak, and another with a special licence in his pocket, it does make a difference, doesn't it?

REX: My position is absolutely intolerable.

CAROLINE: [*With a sigh of self-satisfaction.*] I am the unattainable.

REX: [*Absorbed in himself.*] Oh, how I'm going to suffer. I'm going to endure absolute agonies.

CAROLINE: [*In exactly the same condition.*] I am young. I am beautiful. I am desired.

REX: You're not paying any attention to me. I adore you, Caroline.

CAROLINE: [*Looking away modestly.*] I can never love you, Rex.

REX: Are you quite, quite sure of that, Caroline?

CAROLINE: Quite, quite.

REX: [*With a sigh of satisfaction.*] My heart's never been so broken as this time. It'll take me all my life to piece it together again. You do believe in my love now, don't you?

CAROLINE: Oh, yes. A woman has such quick intuition. I know that you love me.

REX: I shall pass sleepless night after sleepless night.

CAROLINE: I can hardly bear to think of it.

REX: And there's nothing you can do, is there?

CAROLINE: Nothing.

REX: [*With immense enjoyment.*] I'm simply going to have a rotten time.

CAROLINE: It's wonderful to be capable of such love.

REX: Yes, I'm like that. I never knew anyone who could suffer as I can.

CAROLINE: It's only those who can who are worthy of a great love.

REX: Do you think it would be unmanly of me to cry?

CAROLINE: I shouldn't like you to do it here.

REX: Oh, no. I'll keep a stiff upper lip as long as I'm with you. But to-morrow morning I shouldn't wonder at all if my pillow was sopping.

CAROLINE: Have you a waterproof sheet?

REX: Yes. I never travel without one.

CAROLINE: [*Giving him her hand.*] I wish you could marry some nice pure young English girl.

REX: With a bit of money? I can never forget you, Caroline. Why are you giving me your hand?

CAROLINE: [*With emotion.*] I thought you were going away.

REX: I can't leave you like this. We must talk this over thoroughly. I've got masses of things I want to say to you.

CAROLINE: Not now, Rex. I'm shattered by all this emotion.

REX: Well, when can I see you again?

CAROLINE: I'm afraid I'm dreadfully full up this week.

REX: Caroline, have pity on me.

CAROLINE: Of course, if you hadn't been engaged to-night you might have come and dined here.

REX: But I'm not engaged to-night.

CAROLINE: I thought you were dining with Isabella.

REX: I can dine with Isabella any night.

CAROLINE: Won't she be hurt if you throw her over?

REX: To tell you the truth, Caroline, I don't think I'm going to get on with Isabella.

CAROLINE: D'you find her too . . . too melting?

REX: My dear Caroline, she's like butter on a hot day. No, no, too many tears have been wept on that bosom; I'm not going to bedew it with mine.

CAROLINE: In that case dinner at eight sharp.

REX: I'll come, Caroline . . . if nothing unfortunate has happened to me before then.

CAROLINE: Oh, be careful, I've got quite a nice little dinner.

REX: [*Gloomily.*] What have you got?

CAROLINE: I've got some fresh caviare. It's just arrived from Russia.

REX: I could eat nothing. In happier moments I don't deny that I like caviare.

CAROLINE: And I've got a little turtle soup.

REX: I might try to swallow a little turtle soup.

CAROLINE: [*Softly.*] Don't let anything happen before dinner.

REX: I suppose you haven't got grilled salmon?

CAROLINE: No, turbot.

REX: [*Desperately.*] Everything goes against me.

CAROLINE: On the other hand, I've got some dear little baby chickens just out of their shells. It seems almost unkind to eat them when so young.

REX: I dare say they've been saved a lot of unhappiness.

CAROLINE: And then nothing but a strawberry ice.

REX: I shouldn't wonder if I could eat the ice.

CAROLINE: Then you'll come?

REX: [*With a deep sigh.*] If it'll give you any pleasure. A dinner-jacket or a white tie?

CAROLINE: A dinner-jacket.

REX: All right. Good-bye. I . . . I can't say good-bye to the others. I'm in such a fearful state of agitation.

[*Exit. ISABELLA bears the door close and comes back into the room.*]

ISABELLA: Has Rex gone? He was going to drive me home.

CAROLINE: How stupid of him! I suppose he forgot.

ISABELLA: I'll get a taxi. I want to leave you alone with Robert. He's dreadfully upset, Caroline.

CAROLINE: Is he?

ISABELLA: I've been trying to console him a little.

CAROLINE: Yes, I saw you.

ISABELLA: Be very gentle with him, Caroline. Be tender.

CAROLINE: I shall never find the exquisite things to say to him that you would, Isabella.

ISABELLA: He says I have a wonderful gift of sympathy.

CAROLINE: [*With a sigh.*] I wonder if you'd come and dine with me to-night?

ISABELLA: I'm afraid I've asked Rex.

CAROLINE: I'm sure he doesn't need you half as much as I do.

ISABELLA: Oh, if you need me, Caroline, of course I'll come. Somehow I felt you'd want me to-night. We'll have a good cry together, darling.

CAROLINE: Oh, that will be nice.

ISABELLA: Good-bye till then, dearest; I suppose I'd better put on a tea-gown.

CAROLINE: Oh, yes, that'll be very suitable. Dinner at eight sharp.

ISABELLA: Only an egg for me, Caroline.

[*She goes out. ROBERT bears her last word as he comes into the room.*]

ROBERT: When is she going to eat an egg?

CAROLINE: For dinner.

ROBERT: How disgusting! Where?

CAROLINE: Here.

ROBERT: You don't mean to say you've invited her to dinner?

CAROLINE: Yes.

ROBERT: Why on earth have you done that?

CAROLINE: You asked me to.

ROBERT: I never did anything of the sort. Really, Caroline, you are too inconsiderate.

CAROLINE: I thought you wanted to play bridge afterwards.

ROBERT: Bridgel! You might have known that this evening of all others I'd want to be alone with you. Upon my word, it's too callous!

CAROLINE: Oh, Robert!

ROBERT: I'm staggering under the bitterest disappointment of my life. I'm utterly miserable. The only thing that consoled me was the thought of having a quiet evening alone with you so that we could have a good talk. And you bring that cackling woman along.

CAROLINE: I thought you were so fond of her.

ROBERT: You know perfectly well that for ten years I've been supremely indifferent to every woman in the world but you.

CAROLINE: [*She begins to understand.*] Oh! [*With a smile.*] It's very nice of you to say so, dear Robert.

ROBERT: Caroline, I don't know how I'm going to bear it. I feel as if the earth were tottering under my feet.

CAROLINE: You must have patience, Robert.

ROBERT: Patience! I've had patience for ten years. And now just when the reward was put into my hands it's snatched away.

CAROLINE: You know, I expected you to be rather relieved at hearing that my husband was alive.

ROBERT: I? My dear Caroline, have you gone out of your mind?

CAROLINE: You weren't so very anxious to marry me this morning.

ROBERT: Nonsense, Caroline. You know very well that I've always been anxious to marry you.

CAROLINE: You dissembled with some skill, Robert.

ROBERT: I will be perfectly frank with you, Caroline. At the first moment I was a little startled. It meant beginning a new life and the change of all my habits. But that was only a natural hesitation. When you accepted me I *knew* I'd achieved the dearest wish of my heart. Caroline, I've never wanted to marry you as much as I do now.

CAROLINE: Don't you think I'm a little old to marry?

ROBERT: You?

CAROLINE: It has occurred to me sometimes that I'm not quite so young as I was. A spiteful person might say I was almost middle-aged!

ROBERT: What nonsense! Why, you haven't reached your prime yet.

CAROLINE: Are you sure you see no change in me?

ROBERT: None. This morning I thought perhaps you were almost looking your age. But now, I don't know what's happened to you, you look radiant. You've not been making up, have you?

CAROLINE: Oh, no, I never do that.

ROBERT: You look eighteen. You're ravishing. If I hadn't been madly in love with you for ten years I should fall in love with you this afternoon.

CAROLINE: It makes me feel so happy to hear you say that.

ROBERT: Oh, it's cruel that this man should come back just when we'd fixed everything up. I want to be married to you, Caroline. Why shouldn't we take the matter in our own hands and force the wretched fellow to divorce you?

CAROLINE: We've discussed that so often and we've decided it was impossible. We're slaves of our past, our circumstances, and our surroundings. It can't be done, Robert.

ROBERT: D'you mean to say we must go on like this?

CAROLINE: Are you sure we're not happier as we are? We can keep our ideals in one another. Who knows what painful surprises marriage might bring us? You might find me flirtatious and exacting. I might discover you were selfish and comfort-loving.

ROBERT: Hang it all, Caroline, I'm not selfish. I have a passion for self-sacrifice.

CAROLINE: Nothing is so pleasant as to think of the sacrifices that one will never have to make.

ROBERT: Caroline, you don't know how I love you.

CAROLINE: Our love has lasted very long, Robert. Don't you think a closer connection might give it all sorts of little rubs and wrenches till there was nothing of it left? One may reasonably ask one thing of life, that it shouldn't tear rents in the illusions it creates. Illusion may be the foundation of all our happiness, but even if it is illusion let us keep it.

ROBERT: You may talk, but that man can't live for ever.

CAROLINE: He has a wonderful physique.

ROBERT: Next time he dies, I shall seize you by the hair of your head and drag you to the altar.

CAROLINE: He'll see us both out. I'm conscious that he lives now with a new and different life. It may be that

he's necessary for our happiness. So, I cannot fade and you will ever love. My husband has been found. [*With immense decision.*] And now, Robert, he will never die.

ROBERT: Caroline, I adore you.

[*He clasps her in his arms.*]

THE END

HOME AND BEAUTY

A FARCE

in Three Acts

CHARACTERS

WILLIAM, a hero

FREDERICK, another

VICTORIA, a dear little thing

MR. LEICESTER PATON, a wangler

MR. A. B. RAHAM, a solicitor

MISS MONTMORENCY, a maiden lady

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH, a mother-in-law

MISS DENNIS, a manicurist

MRS. POGSON, a respectable woman

TAYLOR, a parlourmaid

NANNIE, a nurse

CLARENCE, a boy

The action of the play takes place at Victoria's house in Westminster towards the end of November, 1918.

HOME AND BEAUTY

THE FIRST ACT

The scene is VICTORIA's bedroom. It is the kind of bedroom which is only used to sleep in; and but for the bed, with its hangings and its beautiful coverlet, and the great lacquer dressing-table, crowded with the necessary aids to feminine beauty, might just as well be a sitting-room. There are graceful pieces of furniture here and there, attractive pictures on the walls, flowers: it is all very comfortable, luxurious and modish. In the fire-place a bright fire is burning.

VICTORIA, a pretty little thing in a lovely "confection," which is partly tea-gown and partly dressing-gown, is lying on a sofa having her hands manicured. MISS DENNIS, the manicurist, is a neat, trim person of twenty-five. She has a slight cockney accent.

MISS DENNIS: [*Evidently ending a long story.*] And so at last I said to him: Oh, very well, 'ave it your own way.

VICTORIA: One has to in the end, you know.

MISS DENNIS: He'd asked me five times, and I really got tired of saying no. And then, you see, in my business you get to know all the ins and outs of married life, and my impression is that, in the long run, it don't really matter very much who you marry.

VICTORIA: Oh, I do so agree with you there. It all depends on yourself. When my first husband was killed, poor darling, I went all to pieces. My bust simply went to nothing. I couldn't wear a low dress for months.

MISS DENNIS: How dreadful.

VICTORIA: I simply adored him. But you know, I'm just as fond of my second husband.

MISS DENNIS: You must have one of those loving natures.

VICTORIA: Of course, I should never survive it if anything happened to my present husband, but if anything did—touch wood—you know, I couldn't help myself, I'd just have to marry again, and I know I'd love my third husband just as much as I loved the other two.

MISS DENNIS: [*Sighing.*] Love is a wonderful thing.

VICTORIA: Oh, wonderful. Of course, I'd wait the year. I waited the year when my first was killed.

MISS DENNIS: Oh yes, I think one always ought to wait the year.

VICTORIA: I noticed you had an engagement ring on the moment you came in.

MISS DENNIS: I didn't really ought to wear it during business hours, but I like to feel it's there.

VICTORIA: I know the feeling so well. You turn it round under your glove, and you say to yourself: Well, that's settled. Is he nice-looking?

MISS DENNIS: Well, he's not what you might call exactly handsome, but he's got a nice face.

VICTORIA: Both my husbands have been very handsome men. You know, people say it doesn't matter what a man looks like, but that's all nonsense. There's nothing shows a woman off like a good-looking man.

MISS DENNIS: He's very fair.

VICTORIA: Of course, it's all a matter of taste, but I don't think I should like that myself. They always say fair men are deceitful. Both my husbands were dark, and they both had the D.S.O.

MISS DENNIS: That's funny, isn't it?

VICTORIA: I flatter myself there are not many women who've been married to two D.S.O.'s. I think I've done my bit.

MISS DENNIS: I should just think you had. If it's not asking too much, I should like to know which of them you liked best.

VICTORIA: Well, you know, I really can't say.

MISS DENNIS: Of course, I haven't had the experience, but I should have thought you'd prefer the one who wasn't there. That almost seems like human nature, doesn't it?

VICTORIA: The fact is, all men have their faults. They're selfish, brutal and inconsiderate. They don't understand how much everything costs. They can't *see* things, poor dears; they're cat-witted. Of course, Freddie's very unreasonable sometimes, but then so was Bill. And he adores me. He can hardly bear me out of his sight. They both adored me.

MISS DENNIS: That makes up for a great deal, I must say.

VICTORIA: I can't understand the women who complain that they're misunderstood. I don't want to be understood. I want to be loved.

[TAYLOR *opens the door and introduces* MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH. *This is* VICTORIA's *mother, an elderly, grey-haired lady in black.*

TAYLOR: Mrs. Shuttleworth.

[*Exit.*

VICTORIA: [*Gushing.*] Darling Mother.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: My precious child.

VICTORIA: This is Miss Dennis. It's the only moment in the day she was able to give me.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: [*Graciously.*] How do you do?

VICTORIA: You don't mind coming up all these stairs, do you, darling? You see, we have to be dreadfully economical with our coal. We tried to wangle more, but we couldn't manage it.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: Oh, I know. The coal controller was positively rude to me. Red tape, you know.

VICTORIA: They say we can only have two fires. Of course, we have to have one in the nursery, and I must have one in my bedroom. So I have to see people in here.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: And how are the precious darlings?

VICTORIA: Fred's got a slight cold, and Nannie thought he'd better stay in bed, but Baby's splendid. Nannie will bring him in presently.

MISS DENNIS: Are they both boys, Mrs. Lowndes?

VICTORIA: Yes. But I'm going to have a girl next time.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: Fred will be two next month, Victoria.

VICTORIA: I know. I'm beginning to feel so old. Poor lamb, he wasn't born till three months after his father was killed.

MISS DENNIS: How very sad. You don't like the nails too red, do you?

VICTORIA: Not too red.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: She looked too sweet in mourning. I wish you could have seen her, Miss Dennis.

VICTORIA: Mother, how can you say anything so heartless? Of course, black does suit me. There's no denying that.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: I insisted on her going to Mathilde. Mourning *must* be well made, or else it looks nothing at all.

MISS DENNIS: Did you say your little boy's name was Fred? After his father, I suppose?

VICTORIA: Oh no, my first husband was called William. He particularly wanted the baby to be called Frederick after Major Lowndes. You see, Major Lowndes had been my husband's best man, and they'd always been such great friends.

MISS DENNIS: Oh, I see.

VICTORIA: Then, when I married Major Lowndes, and my second baby was born, we thought it would be nice to give it my first husband's name, and so we called it William.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: I was against it myself. I thought it would always remind the dear child of what she'd lost.

VICTORIA: Oh, but, Mother darling, I don't feel a bit like that about Bill. I shall never forget him. [*To Miss DENNIS, pointing to a double photograph frame.*] You see, I have their photographs side by side.

MISS DENNIS: Some men wouldn't like that very much.

VICTORIA: Freddie has me now. He can't grudge it if I give a passing thought to that poor dead hero who's lying in a nameless grave in France.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: Don't upset yourself, darling. You know how bad it is for your skin. She has such a soft heart, poor dear.

VICTORIA: Of course, now the war's over, it's different, but when Freddie was at the front I always thought it must be a consolation to him to think that if anything happened to him and I married again I should always keep a little corner in my heart for him.

MISS DENNIS: There, I think that's all for to-day, Mrs. Lowndes. Would you like me to come again on Friday?

[She proceeds to put away the various utensils she has been using.]

VICTORIA: [*Looking at her nails.*] Please. You do them beautifully. There's something very satisfactory in a well-manicured hand. It gives you a sense of assurance, doesn't it? If I were a man I would never want to hold a hand that wasn't nicely manicured.

MISS DENNIS: The gentleman I'm going to marry said to me that the first thing that attracted him was the way my nails were polished.

VICTORIA: One never knows what'll take a man's fancy.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: Personally, I am a firm believer in first impressions. And that is why I say to all the girls I know: Whenever you are being shown into a drawing-room bite both your lips hard, give them a good lick, put your head in the air, and then sail in. There's nothing men like more than a red moist mouth. I'm an old woman now, but I never go into a room without doing it.

MISS DENNIS: Fancy, now, I never thought of that. I must try it and see.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: It may make all the difference to your life.

VICTORIA: Miss Dennis is engaged to be married, Mother.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: Ah, my dear, don't make the common mistake of thinking that because you've got one man safe you need not make yourself attractive to others.

VICTORIA: On Friday next, then, Miss Dennis.

MISS DENNIS: Very well, Mrs. Lowndes. Is there anything you're wanting just at the moment?

VICTORIA: Nothing, thanks.

MISS DENNIS: I've got a new skin food that they've just sent me over from Paris. I would like you to give it a trial. I think it's just the thing for your complexion.

VICTORIA: I'm afraid to try anything I don't know. I've got such a delicate skin.

MISS DENNIS: It's been specially prepared for skins like yours, Mrs. Lowndes. The ordinary skin food is well enough for the ordinary skin, but a really beautiful skin like yours wants something very extra-special in the way of food.

VICTORIA: I expect it's frightfully expensive, and you know, they say we must economize. I suppose somebody's got to pay for the war.

MISS DENNIS: I'll make special terms for you, Mrs. Lowndes. I'll only charge you fifty-nine and six for a three-guinea pot. It's a large pot, as large as that. [*She measures with her fingers a pot about three inches high.*] I promise you it's not an extravagance. A good skin food is an investment.

VICTORIA: Oh well, bring it with you next time you come.

MISS DENNIS: I'm sure you won't regret it. Good afternoon, Mrs. Lowndes. [*To MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH.*] Good afternoon.

[She goes out.]

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: I dare say she's right. They pick up a lot of experience, those women. I always say the same thing to girls: Look after your skin, and your bills will look after themselves.

VICTORIA: She was telling me that the Johnston Blakes are going to divorce.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: [*Without concern.*] Really. Why?

VICTORIA: He's been fighting for the last four years. He says he wants a little peace now.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: I'm afraid many of these men who've been away so long will have got out of the habit of being married. I dare say it was a mercy that poor Bill was killed.

VICTORIA: Mother darling, how can you say anything so dreadful?

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: Well, I must say I was thankful when Freddie got a job at the War Office. The difference between men and women is that men are not naturally addicted to matrimony. With patience, firmness, and occasional rewards you can train them to it just as you can train a dog to walk on its hind legs. But a dog would rather walk on all fours and a man would rather be free. Marriage is a habit.

VICTORIA: And a very good one, Mother.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: Of course. But the unfortunate thing about this world is that good habits are so much easier to get out of than bad ones.

VICTORIA: Well, one thing I do know, and that is that Freddie simply adores being married to me.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: In your place, I should have married Leicester Paton.

VICTORIA: Good heavens, why?

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: Have you never noticed that he wears spats? Men who wear spats always make the best husbands.

VICTORIA: It probably only means that he has cold feet. I expect he wears bedsocks, and I should hate that.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: Nonsense. It means that he has a neat and orderly mind. He likes things just so. Everything in its place and at the proper season. In fact, a creature of habit. I am convinced that after six months of marriage Leicester Paton would forget that he'd ever been a bachelor.

VICTORIA: I was a soldier's widow. I don't think it would have been very patriotic to marry a civilian.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: You girls all talked as though the war would last for ever. Heroism is all very well, but at a party it's not nearly so useful as a faculty for small talk.

[TAYLOR comes in.

TAYLOR: Mr. Leicester Paton has called, madam. I said I didn't know if you could see him.

VICTORIA: Talk of the devil. Oh yes, bring him up here.

TAYLOR: Very good, madam.

[Exit.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: I didn't know you were seeing anything of him, Victoria.

VICTORIA: [*With some archness.*] He's been rather attentive lately.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: I knew I was right. I felt sure you attracted him.

VICTORIA: Oh, darling, you know I can never think of anyone but Freddie, but of course it's useful to have someone to run errands for one. And he can wangle almost anything one wants.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: Butter?

VICTORIA: Everything, my dear, butter, sugar, whisky.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: Bite your lips, darling, and give them a good lick. [*VICTORIA carries out the suggestion.*] You missed the chance of your life.

VICTORIA: After all, he never asked me.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: Don't be silly, Victoria, you should have made him.

VICTORIA: You know that I adored Freddie. Besides, ration books hadn't come in then.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: By the way, where is Freddie?

VICTORIA: Oh, my dear, I'm perfectly furious with him. He promised to take me out to luncheon, and he never turned up. He never telephoned or anything; not a word. I think it's too bad of him. He may be dead for all I know.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: Optimist.

[*TAYLOR ushers in MR. LEICESTER PATON, and then goes out. He is a small, fat man, very well pleased with the world and with himself, beautifully dressed and obviously prosperous. You could tell at a mile that he had so much money that he did not know what to do with it. He is affable, gallant and easy.*]

TAYLOR: Mr. Leicester Paton.

VICTORIA: I hope you don't mind being dragged up all these stairs. We have to be so dreadfully economical

with our coal. I can only afford to have a fire in my bedroom.

PATON: [*Shaking hands with her.*] You're not going to tell me that you have any trouble about getting coal. Why on earth didn't you let me know? [*Shaking hands with Mrs. SHUTTLEWORTH.*] How do you do?

VICTORIA: You don't mean to say you could get me some?

PATON: It's quite out of the question that a pretty woman shouldn't have everything she wants.

VICTORIA: I told Freddie that I felt sure he could wangle it somehow. What's the use of being at the War Office if you can't have some sort of a pull?

PATON: Leave it to me. I'll see what I can do for you.

VICTORIA: You're a perfect marvel.

PATON: Now that these men are coming back from the front no one would look at us poor devils who stayed at home if we didn't at least make ourselves useful.

VICTORIA: You only stayed at home because it was your duty.

PATON: I attested, you know; I didn't wait to be called up. But the Government said to me: You're a shipbuilder: go on building ships. So I built them ships.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: I think it was very noble of you.

PATON: And then they bring in a tax on excess profits. As I said to the Prime Minister myself: It's trying one's patriotism rather high. It really is.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: A little bird has whispered to me that the Government intends to show its appreciation of your great services in the next Honours List.

PATON: Oh, one doesn't ask for that. One's glad to have been able to do one's bit.

VICTORIA: How true that is. That's just what I feel.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: Victoria has worked like a dog, you know. It's a marvel to me how her health has stood it.

VICTORIA: I don't know how many committees I've been on. I've sold at twenty-three bazaars.

PATON: There's nothing that takes it out of one so much.

VICTORIA: At the beginning of the war I worked in a canteen, but I had to give that up, because I could never go out to lunch anywhere. I thought at one time of working in a hospital, but you know all the red tape there is in those places—they said I had no training.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: I'm sure you'd have made a wonderful nurse.

VICTORIA: I didn't propose to be the ordinary sort of nurse at all. I was quite content to leave that to those unfortunate females who make their living by it. But it doesn't want any particular training to be nice to those poor, dear, wounded boys, to shake out their pillows and take them flowers, and read to them. It only wants sympathy.

PATON: I don't know anyone who has more.

VICTORIA: [*With a flash of her eyes.*] With people I like.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: Have you stopped your teas, darling?

VICTORIA: Oh, yes, after the Armistice.

PATON: You used to give teas to wounded soldiers?

VICTORIA: Yes, Tommies, you know. I think it's so important to cultivate the personal relation. I used to invite a dozen every Thursday. At first I had them in the drawing-room, but it made them shy, poor dears, so I thought it would be nicer for them if they had it in the servants' hall. I'm the only woman I know who never had the smallest trouble with her maids.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: Darling, I think I'll go upstairs and see how my dear little grandson is. I do hope it's not influenza.

VICTORIA: Yes, do, Mother. He'll be thrilled to see you.

[MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH *goes out*. LEICESTER PATON, *rising as she does, when he sits down again takes a place on the sofa beside VICTORIA.*

PATON: Is anything the matter with your little boy?

VICTORIA: Poor darling, he's got a cold.

PATON: I'm so sorry.

VICTORIA: I dare say it's nothing, but you know what a mother is: she can't help feeling anxious.

PATON: You're a wonderful mother.

VICTORIA: I adore my children.

PATON: [*Going on with his sentence.*] And a perfect wife.

VICTORIA: D'you think so?

PATON: Doesn't your husband?

VICTORIA: Oh, he's only my husband. His opinion doesn't count.

PATON: Does he know what a lucky man he is?

VICTORIA: If he does he's quite convinced that he deserves to be.

PATON: I envy him.

VICTORIA: [*Flashing a glance at him.*] You don't think I'm quite detestable, then?

PATON: Shall I tell you what I think of you?

VICTORIA: No, don't, you'll only exaggerate. You know, there are only two qualities that I flatter myself on: I'm not vain and I am unselfish.

[FREDERICK *comes in*. *He is a tall, soldierly fellow in uniform, with red tabs and a number of ribbons on his tunic. He nods to LEICESTER PATON and shakes hands with him.*

VICTORIA: Freddie, where *have* you been all this time?

FREDERICK: I've been at the club.

VICTORIA: But you promised to take me out to luncheon.

FREDERICK: Did I? I forgot all about it. I'm so sorry.

VICTORIA: Forgot? I suppose something more amusing turned up.

FREDERICK: Well, I only said I'd come if I wasn't too busy.

VICTORIA: Were you busy?

FREDERICK: I was.

VICTORIA: Bill was never too busy to give me luncheon when I wanted it.

FREDERICK: Fancy that.

PATON: I think I'll be getting along. Now the war's over you fellows can take things easily. My work goes on just the same.

FREDERICK: That's a new car you've got, isn't it?

PATON: I have to get about somehow, you know.

FREDERICK: So do I, but being only a soldier I manage to do it on my flat feet.

PATON: [*Shaking hands with VICTORIA.*] Good-bye.

VICTORIA: Good-bye. So nice of you to come and see me.

[LEICESTER PATON *goes out.*]

VICTORIA: I should be glad to know why you threw me over like that.

FREDERICK: Are you obliged to receive visitors in your bedroom?

VICTORIA: You don't mean to say you're jealous, darling? I thought you seemed grumpy. Is he put out? Let him come and give his little wife a nice kiss.

FREDERICK: [*Irritably.*] I'm not in the least jealous.

VICTORIA: You silly old thing. You know it's the only room in the house that's got a fire.

FREDERICK: Why the dickens don't you have one in the drawing-room?

VICTORIA: My poor lamb, have you forgotten that there's

been a war and there happens to be a shortage of coal? I will tell you exactly why we don't have a fire in the drawing-room. Patriotism.

FREDERICK: Patriotism be hanged. The place is like an ice-house.

VICTORIA: Darling, don't be unreasonable. After spending two winters in the trenches I shouldn't have thought you'd be such a slave to your comfort. I know you don't mean it when you say patriotism be hanged, but you shouldn't say things like that even in jest.

FREDERICK: I'm dashed if I can see why it would be less patriotic to have a fire in the drawing-room where we could all benefit by it, rather than here where it's no good to anyone but you.

VICTORIA: [*Opening her eyes very wide.*] Darling, you're not going to ask me to do without a fire in my bedroom? How can you be so selfish? Heaven knows, I don't want to boast about anything I've done, but after having slaved my life out for four years I do think I deserve a little consideration.

FREDERICK: How's the kid?

VICTORIA: And it's not as if I grudged you the use of my room. You can come and sit here as much as you like. Besides, a man has his club. He can always go there if he wants to.

FREDERICK: I apologize. You're quite right. You're always right.

VICTORIA: I thought you wanted me to be happy.

FREDERICK: I do, darling.

VICTORIA: Before we were married, you said you'd make that the chief aim of your life.

FREDERICK: [*Smiling.*] I can't imagine that a sensible man could want a better one.

VICTORIA Confess that you've been a perfect pig.

FREDERICK: A brute beast, darling.

VICTORIA: [*Mollified.*] D'you know that I asked you to give me a kiss just now? It's not a request that I'm in the habit of having ignored.

FREDERICK: I trust it's not one that you're in the habit of making to all and sundry.

[*He kisses her.*]

VICTORIA: Now tell me why you forgot to take me out to luncheon to-day.

FREDERICK: I didn't forget. I was prevented. I . . . I haven't had any luncheon myself. I'll just ring and ask the cook to send me up something.

VICTORIA: My poor lamb, the cook left this morning.

FREDERICK: Again?

VICTORIA: How d'you mean again? This is the first time she's left.

FREDERICK: Hang it all, she's only been here a week.

VICTORIA: You needn't get cross about it. It's much more annoying for me than for you.

FREDERICK: [*Irritably.*] I don't know why on earth you can't keep your servants.

VICTORIA: No one can keep servants nowadays.

FREDERICK: Other people do.

VICTORIA: Please don't speak to me like that, Freddie. I'm not used to it.

FREDERICK: I shall speak to you exactly as I choose.

VICTORIA: It's so petty to lose your temper just because you can't have something to eat. I should have thought after spending two years in the trenches you'd be accustomed to going without a meal now and then.

FREDERICK: For goodness' sake don't make a scene.

VICTORIA: It's not I who am making a scene. It's you who are making a scene.

FREDERICK: Victoria, I beg you to control yourself.

VICTORIA: I don't know how you can be so unkind to me. After all the anxiety I suffered on your account when you were in France, I do think you might have a little consideration for me.

FREDERICK: Seeing that for the last year I've had a perfectly safe, cushy job at the War Office, I think you might by now have recovered from any anxiety you felt on my account.

VICTORIA: Must I remind you that my nerves were shattered by poor Bill's death?

FREDERICK: No, but I was confident you would.

VICTORIA: The doctor said I should need the greatest attention for several years. I don't believe I shall ever quite get over it. I should have thought even if you didn't love me any more you'd have a little human pity for me. That's all I ask, just the tolerant kindness you'd show to a dog who was fond of you. [*Working herself up into a passion.*] Heaven knows I'm not exacting. I do everything I can to make you happy. I'm patience itself. Even my worst enemy would have to admit that I'm unselfish. [*As he is about to speak.*] You weren't obliged to marry me. I didn't ask you to. You pretended you loved me. I would never have married you if it hadn't been for Bill. You were his greatest friend. You made me love you because you spoke so beautifully of him. [*He is just going to say something, but she goes on implacably.*] That's my mistake. I've loved you too much. You're not big enough to bear so great a love. Oh, what a fool I've been. I let myself be taken in by you, and I've been bitterly punished. [*Heading off the words she sees he wants to speak.*] Bill would never have treated me like that. Bill wouldn't have taken my poor, loving heart and thrown it aside like an old hat. Bill loved me. He would have always loved me. I adored that man. He

waited on me hand and foot. He was the most unselfish man I ever knew. He was a hero. He's the only man I ever really cared for. I was mad ever to think of marrying you, mad, mad, mad. I shall never be happy again. I would give anything in the world to have my dear, dear Bill back again.

FREDERICK: I'm glad you feel like that about it, because he'll be here in about three minutes.

VICTORIA: [*Brought up short.*] What? What on earth d'you mean by that?

FREDERICK: He rang me up at the club a little while ago.

VICTORIA: Freddie. What are you talking about? Are you mad?

FREDERICK: No. Nor drunk.

VICTORIA: I don't understand. Who talked to you?

FREDERICK: Bill.

VICTORIA: Bill. Bill who?

FREDERICK: Bill Cardew.

VICTORIA: But, poor darling, he's dead.

FREDERICK: He showed no sign of it on the telephone.

VICTORIA: But, Freddie . . . Freddie. Oh, you're pulling my leg. It's too beastly of you. How can you be so heartless?

FREDERICK: Well, just wait and you'll see for yourself. [*Looking at his wrist watch.*] In about two and a half minutes now, I should think.

VICTORIA: [*Coaxing him.*] Now, Freddie, don't be vindictive. I dare say I was rather catty. I didn't mean it. You know I adore you. You can have a fire in your study, and damn the food controller. I'm sorry for all I said just now. There, now, it's all right, isn't it?

FREDERICK: Perfectly. But it's not going to prevent Bill from walking into this room in about two minutes and a quarter.

VICTORIA: I shall scream. It's not true. Oh, Freddie, if you ever loved me, say it's not true.

FREDERICK: There's no need to take my word for it.

VICTORIA: But, Freddie, darling, do be sensible. Poor Bill was killed at the Battle of Ypres. He was actually seen to fall. He was reported dead by the War Office. You know how distressed I was. I wore mourning and everything. We even had a memorial service.

FREDERICK: I know. It'll want a devil of a lot of explaining, turning up like this.

VICTORIA: I shall go stark, staring mad in a minute. How do you know it was Bill who spoke to you on the telephone?

FREDERICK: He said so.

VICTORIA: That proves nothing. Lots of people say they're the Kaiser.

FREDERICK: Yes, but they speak from a lunatic asylum. He spoke from Harwich Station.

VICTORIA: I dare say it was somebody else of the same name.

FREDERICK: That's idiotic, Victoria. I recognized his voice.

VICTORIA: What did he say exactly?

FREDERICK: Well, he said he was at Harwich Station, and would be in London at 3.13. And would I break it to you?

VICTORIA: But he must have said more than that.

FREDERICK: No, not much.

VICTORIA: For goodness' sake, tell me exactly what he said—exactly.

FREDERICK: Well, I was just coming along to take you out to luncheon, when I was told I was wanted on the telephone. A long-distance call—Harwich.

VICTORIA: I know. A seaport town.

FREDERICK: I strolled along and took up the receiver. I said: Is that you, darling?

VICTORIA: Why did you say that?

FREDERICK: That's always a good opening on the telephone. It puts the person at the other end at their ease.

VICTORIA: Idiot.

FREDERICK: Somebody said: Is that you, Freddie? I thought I recognized the voice, and I felt all funny. Yes, I said. It's me, Bill, he said, Bill Cardew.

VICTORIA: For heaven's sake be quick about it.

FREDERICK: Hulloo, I said, I thought you were dead. I thought as much, he answered. How are you? I said. At, he said.

VICTORIA: What an idiotic conversation.

FREDERICK: Damn it all, I had to say something.

VICTORIA: You ought to have said a thousand things.

FREDERICK: We only had three minutes.

VICTORIA: Well, go on.

FREDERICK: He said: I'm just tootling up to London. I'll be up at 3.13. You might go along and break it to Victoria. Right ho, I said. He said, So-long, and I said, So-long. And we rang off.

VICTORIA: But that was before luncheon. Why didn't you come at once and tell me?

FREDERICK: To tell you the truth I was a bit shaken by then. I thought the first thing was to have a double whisky and a small soda.

VICTORIA: And what did you do then?

FREDERICK: Well, I sat down to think. I thought steadily for a couple of hours.

VICTORIA: And what have you thought?

FREDERICK: Nothing.

VICTORIA: It seems hardly worth while to have gone without your lunch.

FREDERICK: It's a devilish awkward position for me.

VICTORIA: For you? And what about me?

FREDERICK: After all, Bill was my oldest pal. He may think it rather funny that I've married his wife.

VICTORIA: Funny!

FREDERICK: On the other hand, he may not.

VICTORIA: Why didn't you tell me the moment you came in, instead of talking about heaven knows what?

FREDERICK: It wasn't a very easy thing to say. I was trying to find an opportunity to slip it in casually, don't you know.

VICTORIA: [*Furiously.*] Wasting precious time.

FREDERICK: [*Blandly.*] Darling, you surely don't think making a scene is ever waste of time.

VICTORIA: Now we haven't got a chance to decide on anything. I haven't even time to put a frock on.

FREDERICK: What the deuce do you want to put a frock on for?

VICTORIA: After all, I am his widow. I think it would be only nice of me to be wearing mourning when he comes. What did he say when you told him?

FREDERICK: When I told him what?

VICTORIA: How can you be so stupid! When you told him you and I were married.

FREDERICK: But I didn't tell him.

VICTORIA: Do you mean to say that he's coming here under the impression that I'm his wife?

FREDERICK: Why, naturally.

VICTORIA: But why on earth didn't you tell him at once? It was the only thing to do. Surely you see that.

FREDERICK: It didn't strike me at the moment. Besides, it's rather a delicate thing to say on the telephone.

VICTORIA: Well, someone must tell him.

FREDERICK: I've come to the conclusion that you're quite the best person to do that.

VICTORIA: I? I? I? Do you think I'm going to do all your dirty work?

FREDERICK: I must say, I don't think it would come well from me.

VICTORIA: I'm not going to deal my darling Bill this bitter, bitter blow.

FREDERICK: By the way, it's—it's jolly he's alive, isn't it?

VICTORIA: Ripping.

FREDERICK: I am glad, aren't you?

VICTORIA: Yes, awfully glad.

FREDERICK: Then you'll just break the news as gently as you can, Victoria.

VICTORIA: [*As if she were weighing the matter.*] I really don't think that's my province.

FREDERICK: [*Exercising all his charm.*] Darling, you've got so much tact. I never knew anyone who could deal with a delicate situation as you can. You have such a light hand. You're so sympathetic. And you've got such a wonderful tenderness.

VICTORIA: I don't think you've got hold of the right line at all. There's only one way to manage a thing like this. You just take him by the arm and say: Look here, old man, the fact is . . .

FREDERICK: [*Interrupting.*] Victoria, you don't mean to say you're willing to give up the chance of making the biggest scene you've ever made in your life?

VICTORIA: Now look here, Freddie, this is the only thing I've ever asked you to do for me in my life. You know

how frail I am. I'm not feeling at all well. You're the only man I have to lean on.

FREDERICK: It's no good, Victoria. I won't.

VICTORIA: [*Furiously.*] Damn you.

FREDERICK: By George, here he is.

VICTORIA: I've not even powdered my nose. Fortunately I have no personal vanity.

[She begins to powder herself feverishly. The voice is heard of someone coming up the stairs: Hulloo! Hulloo! Hulloo! Then the door is flung open and in bursts WILLIAM. He is a well-set-up, jovial fellow, wearing at the moment a very shabby suit.]

WILLIAM: Here we are again.

VICTORIA: Bill!

FREDERICK: Was I right?

VICTORIA: I can hardly believe my eyes.

WILLIAM: Give me a kiss, old lady. *[He seizes her in his arms and gives her a hearty kiss. Then he turns to FREDERICK. They shake hands.]* Well, Freddie, old man, how's life?

FREDERICK: Ai, thanks.

WILLIAM: Are you surprised to see me?

FREDERICK: A little.

VICTORIA: In fact, a good deal.

WILLIAM: I'm jolly glad to see you here, Freddie, old man. On the way up in the train I cursed myself five times for not having asked you to wait with Victoria till I rolled up. I was afraid you might have some damned feeling of delicacy.

FREDERICK: I?

WILLIAM: You see, it struck me you might think Victoria and I would want to be alone just the first moment, but I should have been as sick as a dog if I hadn't seen your ugly old face here to welcome me. By the way,

you've neither of you said you were glad to see me.

VICTORIA: Of course we're glad, Bill darling.

FREDERICK: Rather.

WILLIAM: Tactful of me to get old Freddie to come round and break the news to you, I think, Victoria.

VICTORIA: Yes, darling, and exactly like you.

WILLIAM: It's just like old times to hear you call me darling every other minute.

FREDERICK: It's one of Victoria's favourite words.

WILLIAM: You know, I nearly didn't warn you. I thought it would be rather a lark to break in on you in the middle of the night.

[FREDERICK and VICTORIA give a little start.]

VICTORIA: I'm just as glad you didn't do that, Bill.

WILLIAM: What a scene, my word. The sleeping beauty on her virtuous couch. Enter a man in a shocking old suit. Shrieks of the sleeping beauty. It is I, your husband. Tableau.

VICTORIA: [*To turn the conversation.*] You're quite right, it is a shocking old suit. Where did you get it?

WILLIAM: I didn't get it. I pinched it. I must say I wouldn't mind getting into some decent things.

[*He walks towards a door that leads out of VICTORIA'S room.*]

VICTORIA: [*Hastily.*] Where are you going?

WILLIAM: I was going into my dressing-room. Upon my soul, I almost forget what I've got. I had a blue serge suit that was rather dressy.

VICTORIA: I've put all your clothes away, darling.

WILLIAM: Where?

VICTORIA: In camphor. You couldn't put them on until they've been aired.

WILLIAM: Hell, said the duchess.

[MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH *comes in*. WILLIAM *is standing so that at first she does not see him*.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: I think the little lamb is going on nicely, Victoria.

VICTORIA: [*Swallowing.*] Mother.

WILLIAM: I was just going to ask about the kid.

[MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH *jumps out of her skin. She turns round and sees WILLIAM*.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: Who is that?

WILLIAM: Who the devil d'you think it is?

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: The language and the voice—Bill Cardew's. Who is that?

WILLIAM: [*Walking towards her.*] Well, I may be a bit thinner and it certainly is a shocking old suit.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: Don't come near me or I shall scream.

WILLIAM: You can't escape me. I'm going to kiss you.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: Take him away. Don't let him come near me. Victoria, who is that man?

FREDERICK: Well, Mrs. Shuttleworth, it's Bill Cardew.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: But he's dead.

FREDERICK: He doesn't seem to know it.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: It's absurd. Will someone wake me up.

WILLIAM: Shall I pinch her, and if so, where?

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: It's a horrible dream. Of course he's dead. That man's an imposter.

WILLIAM: Shall I show you the strawberry mark on my left shoulder?

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: I tell you Bill Cardew's dead.

WILLIAM: Prove it.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: [*Indignantly.*] Prove it? The War

Office announced it officially; Victoria went into mourning.

WILLIAM: Did she look nice in it?

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: Sweet. Perfectly sweet. I insisted on her going to Mathilde. Mourning must be well made or else it looks nothing at all. Why, we had a memorial service.

FREDERICK: Fully choral.

WILLIAM: Did you have a memorial service for me, Victoria? That was nice of you.

VICTORIA: It was very well attended.

WILLIAM: I'm glad it wasn't a frost.

FREDERICK: I say, old man, we don't want to hurry you, you know, but we're all waiting for some sort of explanation.

WILLIAM: I was coming to that. I was just giving you time to get over your first raptures at seeing me again. Have you got over them?

FREDERICK: I can only speak for myself.

WILLIAM: Well, you know, I was damned badly wounded.

FREDERICK: Yes, at Ypres. A fellow saw you fall. He said you were shot through the head. He just stopped a minute, and saw you were killed, and went on.

WILLIAM: A superficial observer. I wasn't. I was eventually picked up and taken to Germany.

VICTORIA: Why didn't you write?

WILLIAM: Well, I think I must have been rather dotty for a bit. I don't know exactly how long I was in hospital, but when I began to sit up and take nourishment I couldn't remember a damned thing. My memory had completely gone.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: Strange. To my mind very strange.

WILLIAM: I think my wound must have made me a bit

irritable. When I was being taken along to a camp I had a difference of opinion with a German officer, and I laid him out. By George, they nearly shot me for that. Anyhow, they sentenced me to about a hundred and fifty years' imprisonment, and prevented me from writing, or making any sign that I was alive.

VICTORIA: But your memory came back?

WILLIAM: Yes, gradually. And, of course, I realized then that you'd think I was dead. But I had no means of letting you know.

FREDERICK: You might have wired from Rotterdam.

WILLIAM: The lines were so congested. They told me I'd arrive before my wire.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: It's all quite probable.

WILLIAM: More or less, I flatter myself. But you can bet your life on one thing: I'm not dead, and, what's more, I propose to live for another forty years, if not fifty.

[TAYLOR comes in.]

TAYLOR: If you please, ma'am, where shall I put the gentleman's things? He told me to bring them upstairs.

WILLIAM: Oh, it's only a few odds and ends for the journey that I got on my way. Put them in the dressing-room.

VICTORIA: No, leave that for the moment, Taylor. We'll decide presently.

TAYLOR: Very good, madam.

[She goes out.]

WILLIAM: What's the matter with the dressing-room, Victoria?

VICTORIA: My poor darling, don't forget your arrival is a complete surprise. Nothing is ready.

WILLIAM: Don't let that worry you. After what I've been used to, I can pig it anywhere. [Looking at the bed.] By George, a spring mattress. Father will sleep without rocking to-night.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: [*Firmly.*] Something's got to be done.

WILLIAM: How d'you mean?

VICTORIA: [*Hurriedly.*] We haven't got a cook.

WILLIAM: Oh, you needn't bother about that. Freddie and I will do the cooking. My speciality is a grilled steak. What can you do, Freddie?

FREDERICK: I can boil an egg.

WILLIAM: Splendid. They always say that's the one thing a chef can't do. Nothing to worry about. We'll get in some *pâté de foie gras* and a few oysters, and there you are. Now let's have a look at the kid.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: He's not very well to-day. I don't think he should leave his bed.

WILLIAM: Oh, all right. I'll toddle up and see him. I haven't made his lordship's acquaintance yet. What's his name?

VICTORIA: [*Rather nervously.*] Don't you remember, just before you went away, you said you'd like him called Frederick if he was a boy.

WILLIAM: Yes, I know I did, but you said you'd see me damned. You'd quite made up your mind to call him Lancelot.

VICTORIA: When I thought you were dead I felt I must respect your wishes.

WILLIAM: It must have been a shock if it took you like that.

VICTORIA: Of course, I asked Freddie to be godfather.

WILLIAM: Has the old ruffian been a stand-by to you while I've been away?

VICTORIA: I . . . I've seen a good deal of him.

WILLIAM: I felt you were safe with him, you know. He's a brick.

FREDERICK: I say, you might spare my blushes while you're about it.

VICTORIA: He was very kind to me during my—bereavement.

WILLIAM: Dear old chap. I knew you were a tower of strength.

FREDERICK: [*Sweating freely.*] I . . . I did what I could, you know.

WILLIAM: Well, don't be so modest about it.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: [*More firmly.*] I tell you something must be done.

WILLIAM: My dear Victoria, what is the matter with your mother?

FREDERICK: [*Trying to change the conversation.*] I think we might bust ourselves and have some bubbly to-night, Victoria.

WILLIAM: And damn the expense.

FREDERICK: I wonder if it's arrived yet. I told them to send a case in the day before yesterday.

WILLIAM: Have you been running the cellar? Rash to let him do that, Victoria, very rash.

VICTORIA: I know nothing about wine.

WILLIAM: Freddie knows a thing or two. I say, do you remember that last time we went on a bat together? You were blind to the world.

FREDERICK: Go to blazes! I was nothing of the sort.

WILLIAM: Pretty little thing that was. Are you as thick with her as you used to be?

[VICTORIA draws herself up and looks daggers at FREDERICK.]

FREDERICK: [*With dignity.*] I haven't an idea who you're referring to.

WILLIAM: Oh, my dear old boy, don't put any frills on. Victoria's a married woman, and she knows what the lads of the village are when they get out. A very nice little girl indeed, Victoria. If I hadn't been a married man I'd have had a shot at cutting Freddie out.

VICTORIA: [*Jeily.*] He always told me he'd never looked at a woman in his life.

WILLIAM: You shouldn't encourage the young to lie. That's what they all say. Rapid. These wretched aeroplane fellows have been turning out engine after engine, and they can't keep pace with him. Talk of a lurid past; Mrs. Shuttleworth, veil your face.

FREDERICK: My poor Bill, your memory! When you recovered it, I'm afraid you remembered all sorts of things that had never happened.

WILLIAM: Past, did I say? Unless I'm very much mistaken, his present wouldn't bear the closest inspection.

FREDERICK: By George, I've hit it. The poor fellow thinks he's being funny.

WILLIAM: [*Going on.*] I don't blame you. Make hay while the sun shines. I admire the way you can make love to three women at a time and make each one believe she's the only one you've ever really cared for.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: [*With determination.*] If someone doesn't do something at once I shall do it myself.

WILLIAM: [*In a whisper to VICTORIA, pointing at MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH.*] Air raids?

[*At that moment a baby's wail is heard outside.*]

VICTORIA: [*With agitation.*] Willie.

WILLIAM: Hulloo, what's that? Is that the kid? [*He goes swiftly to the door and opens it. The crying is heard more loudly.*] Why, it's coming upstairs. You told me the kid was in the nursery. [*Addressing the nurse.*] Bring him along and let me have a look at him.

[A nurse, in a neat grey uniform, comes in with a baby in her arms.

VICTORIA: [*Desperately.*] Freddie, do something, even if it's only something stupid.

FREDERICK: The only thing that occurs to me is to stand on my head.

WILLIAM: [*Jovially.*] Hulloo, hulloo, hulloo.

FREDERICK: That's not the way to talk to a baby, you owl.

WILLIAM: Not such a baby as all that. Can he speak yet, Nurse?

NURSE: Oh no, sir, not yet.

WILLIAM: Rather backward, isn't he? Not what I should have expected in a son of mine.

[*The NURSE gives him a look of surprise, and then with a look at VICTORIA assumes an appearance of extreme primness.*

NURSE: I never knew a baby talk as young as that, sir.

WILLIAM: Upon my soul, there's not much of him. Looks to me rather a stumper. I think we've been done, Victoria.

NURSE: [*Indignantly.*] Oh, I don't think you ought to say that, sir. He's a very fine boy. He weighs more than a good many do when they're six months.

WILLIAM: What's that? How old is he?

NURSE: Four months last Tuesday, sir.

WILLIAM: You've been busy in my absence, Victoria.

VICTORIA: Freddie, for goodness' sake speak. Don't stand there like a stuffed tomato.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: Leave the room, Nannie.

[*The NURSE, pursing her lips, intrigued and perplexed, goes out.*

FREDERICK: [*Trying to take it lightly.*] The fact is, you've made rather an absurd mistake. You've been away so long that of course there's a good deal you don't know.

WILLIAM: I'm a simple creature.

FREDERICK: Well, to cut a long story short——

WILLIAM: What story?

FREDERICK: I wish you wouldn't interrupt me. I'm telling you as quickly as I can. To cut a long story short, the infant that's just gone out of the room is not your son.

WILLIAM: I had a sort of suspicion he wasn't. I tell you that frankly.

VICTORIA: Oh, the fool. The blithering nincompoop.

WILLIAM: Well, who the deuce is his father?

FREDERICK: In point of fact, I am.

WILLIAM: You? You don't mean to say you're married?

FREDERICK: Lots of people are. In fact, marriage has been quite the thing during the war.

WILLIAM: Why on earth didn't you tell me?

FREDERICK: Hang it all, man, you've been dead for the last three years. How could I?

WILLIAM: [*Seizing his hand.*] Well, I'm jolly glad to hear it, old chap. I knew you'd be caught one of these days. You were a wily old bird, but—ah, well, we all come to it. My very best congratulations.

FREDERICK: That's awfully good of you. I'm—er—I'm staying here, you know.

WILLIAM: Are you? That's first rate. Is your missus here too?

FREDERICK: It's rather difficult to explain.

WILLIAM: Don't tell me she's only got one eye.

FREDERICK: Can't you guess why I'm staying here?

WILLIAM: No. [*He looks round the room and his eyes fall on MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH.*] You don't mean to say you've married Victoria's mother?

FREDERICK: No, not exactly.

WILLIAM: What does he mean by *not exactly*? I hope you haven't been trifling with the affections of my mother-in-law.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: Do I look as if I were the mother of that baby?

WILLIAM: We live in an age of progress. One should keep an open mind about things.

FREDERICK: You quite misunderstand me, Bill.

WILLIAM: Is there nothing between you and Victoria's mother?

FREDERICK: Certainly not.

WILLIAM: Well, I'm sorry. I should have liked to be your son-in-law. And you would have done the right thing by her, wouldn't you?

VICTORIA: Really, Bill, I don't think you should talk about my mother like that.

WILLIAM: If he's compromised her he ought to marry her.

VICTORIA: He hasn't compromised her and he can't marry her.

WILLIAM: I don't want to seem inquisitive, but if you didn't marry Victoria's mother, who did you marry?

FREDERICK: Damn you, I married Victoria.

END OF THE FIRST ACT

THE SECOND ACT

The drawing-room at VICTORIA'S house. It is very bizarre. VICTORIA has put the decoration into the hands of an artist in futurism, and the result is very modern, outrageous, fantastic, but not ugly. There is no fire in the grate and all the windows are open. FREDERICK is sitting in a greatcoat with a rug round his legs, reading the paper. MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH enters.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: I'm going now.

FREDERICK: Are you?

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: I'm taking my dear little grandchildren away with me.

FREDERICK: Are you?

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: You don't seem in a very good temper this morning.

FREDERICK: I'm not.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: Victoria will be down presently.

FREDERICK: Will she?

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: I should have thought you'd ask how she was after that dreadful shock.

FREDERICK: Would you?

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: She's better, poor darling, but she's terribly shaken. I put her to bed at once with hot-water bottles.

FREDERICK: Did you?

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: Of course, she was totally unfit to discuss this terrible situation yesterday.

FREDERICK: Was she?

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: Surely you can see that for yourself. The only thing was to keep her perfectly quiet till she'd had time to recover a little.

FREDERICK: Was it?

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: But this morning I have no doubt you'll find her prepared to go into the matter.

FREDERICK: Shall I?

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: If you have nothing else you wish to say to me I think I'll go now.

FREDERICK: Will you?

[MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH purses her lips very tight and goes towards the door. At that moment TAYLOR comes in.]

TAYLOR: Mr. Leicester Paton has called, madam. Mrs. Lowndes says, will you see him a minute. She's just getting out of her bath.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: Certainly. Show him in here.

TAYLOR: Very good, madam.

[Exit.

FREDERICK: I'll go.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: I wonder what he wants.

FREDERICK: Perhaps he wants Victoria's permission to pay you his addresses.

[He goes out. In a minute TAYLOR announces LEICESTER PATON and then goes out.]

TAYLOR: Mr. Leicester Paton.

PATON: Your daughter rang me up this morning. I thought the best thing I could do was to come along at once.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: That's too good of you. I'm sure if anything can be done you are the man to do it.

PATON: It's an extraordinary situation.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: Of course, I think it was very inconsiderate of Bill to turn up like that.

PATON: Poor thing, she must be quite upset.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: Well, I can only tell you that the shock entirely took the wave out of her hair. She only had it done yesterday, and it was as straight as a telegraph pole this morning.

PATON: You don't say so.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: Here she is.

[VICTORIA comes in. She has her dressing-gown on and bedroom slippers. Her hair is only partly done, but she manages to look perfectly ravishing.]

VICTORIA: I didn't want to keep you waiting. I came down just as I was. You mustn't look at me.

PATON: I can't help it.

VICTORIA: What nonsense. I know I look a perfect fright, but fortunately I have no personal vanity.

PATON: [*Holding her hand.*] What a catastrophe! You must be beside yourself.

VICTORIA: [*With a charming smile.*] I knew I could rely on your sympathy.

PATON: What in heaven's name are you going to do?

VICTORIA: It's because I haven't an idea that I telephoned to you. You see, you've taught me to bring all my difficulties to you.

PATON: To whom else should you bring them? We must think. We must discuss the matter.

VICTORIA: The position is impossible.

PATON: It's wonderful that you bear it so bravely. I was expecting to find you in a state of collapse.

VICTORIA: [*With a flash of the eyes.*] With you to lean on?

PATON: I suppose you've been having the most terrible scenes.

VICTORIA: Heartrending. You see, they both adore me.

PATON: And you?

VICTORIA: I? I only want to do—my duty.

PATON: How like you! How exactly like you.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: If there's nothing more I can do for you, darling I think I'll go now.

VICTORIA: Do, darling.

MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH: [*Shaking hands with LEICESTER PATON*]
Be very kind to her.

PATON: I'll try.

[MRS. SHUTTLEWORTH *goes out*.]

VICTORIA: [*Almost tenderly*.] It was sweet of you to come and see me at once. I was afraid you wouldn't have time.

PATON: Do you imagine I should allow anything to stand in the way when you sent for me?

VICTORIA: Oh, but you know I shouldn't like to think that you were putting yourself out on my account.

PATON: I wish I could pretend I were. As a matter of fact, I was only going down to see a place I've just bought in the country, and as I wanted to try my new Rolls I thought I'd kill two birds with one stone.

VICTORIA: I didn't know you were buying a place.

PATON: Oh, it's a very modest little affair. The park is not more than three hundred acres, and there are only twenty-eight bedrooms. But you see, I'm a bachelor. I want so little.

VICTORIA: Where is it?

PATON: It's near Newmarket.

VICTORIA: A very nice neighbourhood.

PATON: A man in my position is bound to do something for the good of the country, and it seems to me that to patronize a good old English sport, which gives employment to numbers of respectable men, is an occupation which is truly patriotic. I'm going to take up racing.

VICTORIA: I think it's splendid of you. So many men waste their money on their own selfish pleasures. It's such a relief to come across anyone who is determined to make a thoroughly good use of it. I've often wondered that you didn't go into Parliament.

PATON: For the last four years I've been too busy winning the war to bother about governing the nation.

VICTORIA: Yes, but now. They want strong men of keen intelligence and dominating personality.

PATON: It's not impossible that very soon I shall have the opportunity to show of what metal I am made. But not in the House of Commons.

VICTORIA: [*All to pieces.*] In the House of Lords?

PATON: [*Roguishly.*] Ah, you mustn't ask me to betray the confidence of the Prime Minister.

VICTORIA: You'll look sweet in scarlet and ermine.

PATON: [*Gallantly.*] But it's too bad of me to talk about my concerns when yours are so much more important.

VICTORIA: Oh, you can't think how I love to hear you talk about yourself. One feels a brain behind every word you say.

PATON: It's easy to be brilliant when one has a sympathetic listener.

VICTORIA: Of course, Bill and Freddie are dear good fellows, but their conversation is a little limited. During the war it was rather smart to talk about guns, and flying machines, and flea-bags, but now . . .

PATON: I understand you so well, dear lady.

VICTORIA: Why do you call me that?

PATON: Out of pure embarrassment. I don't know whether to call you Mrs. Cardew or Mrs. Lowndes.

VICTORIA: Why don't you split the difference and call me Victoria?

PATON: May I?

VICTORIA: [*Giving him her hand.*] It will make me feel that you are not an entire stranger to me.

PATON: [*With surprise.*] Your wedding rings? You always used to wear two.

VICTORIA: As long as I thought that poor Bill was dead I didn't want to forget him.

PATON: But why have you removed them both?

VICTORIA: I'm all at sea. I'm married to two men, and I feel as if I were married to neither.

PATON: I wish you weren't. I wish with all my heart you weren't.

VICTORIA: How emphatic you are. Why?

PATON: Can't you guess?

VICTORIA: [*Looking down.*] I must be very stupid.

PATON: Don't you know that I dote upon you? I curse my unhappy fate that I didn't meet you before you were married.

VICTORIA: Would you have asked me to marry you?

PATON: Morning, noon and night until you consented.

VICTORIA: I never want a Paris model so much as when I know it's just been sold to somebody else. I wonder if you'd want to marry me if I were free?

PATON: Yes. With all my heart.

VICTORIA: But I'm not free.

PATON: And you—if you were, would you marry me?

VICTORIA: Tell me, why do you wear spats?

PATON: I think they're so neat.

VICTORIA: Oh, not because you suffer from cold feet?

PATON: Oh no, my circulation is excellent.

VICTORIA: I don't believe you're the sort of man who'd ever take no for an answer.

PATON: You're perfectly adorable.

VICTORIA: [*With a smile, shyly.*] I wonder if you'd take me out to luncheon?

PATON: Give me the chance.

VICTORIA: I'll just dress myself. Come back in half an hour, and you'll find me ready.

PATON: Very well.

VICTORIA: Good-bye for the present.

[*They go out together. WILLIAM's voice is heard outside.*]

WILLIAM: Victoria. [*He comes in, but sees nobody in the room.*]
Hullo! [*Shouting.*] Freddie.

FREDERICK: [*Outside.*] Hulloa.

WILLIAM: Freddie.

[*FREDERICK comes in with his rug and his paper.*]

WILLIAM: I say, I can't find my boots.

FREDERICK: Your boots? What do you want your boots for?

WILLIAM: To put them on. What else d'you think I want them for?

FREDERICK: I saw them lying about. I thought I'd better put them away in case of accidents.

WILLIAM: Silly ass. Where did you put them?

FREDERICK: I was just trying to think.

WILLIAM: You don't mean to say you don't know where they are.

FREDERICK: Of course I know where they are because I put them there, but I don't happen to remember just at the moment.

WILLIAM: Well, you hurry up and remember.

FREDERICK: Don't fuss me. I can't possibly remember if you fuss me.

WILLIAM: Try and think where you put them.

FREDERICK: [*Looking doubtfully at a vase.*] I know I didn't put them in one of the flower vases.

WILLIAM: So I should hope.

FREDERICK: They might be in the coal-scuttle.

WILLIAM: If they are I'll black your face with them.

FREDERICK: [*Looking in the scuttle, with triumph.*] I said they weren't in the coal scuttle.

WILLIAM: Fathead. I don't want to know where they're not. I want to know where they are.

FREDERICK: If I knew that I shouldn't be hunting for them.

WILLIAM: If you don't find them in two and a half seconds I'll break every bone in your body.

FREDERICK: It's no good losing your hair about it. If we can't find your boots we can't.

WILLIAM: [*Irritably.*] I say, what the devil have you got all the windows open for?

FREDERICK: I was trying to warm the room a bit. Besides, they say it's healthy.

WILLIAM: A short life and a merry one for me. I like a fug.

[*He shuts the windows.*]

FREDERICK: That won't make it any warmer. I've tried that.

WILLIAM: You silly ass, why don't you light the fire?

FREDERICK: Don't be so damned unpatriotic. Victoria must have a fire in her bedroom, and we must have one in the nursery.

WILLIAM: Why?

FREDERICK: For the children's bath.

WILLIAM: [*Astonished.*] What, every day?

FREDERICK: Yes, they wash children a lot nowadays.

WILLIAM: Poor little beggars.

FREDERICK: [*Jumping up and going towards him.*] Where the devil did you get that suit?

WILLIAM: Rather saucy, I flatter myself. Victoria sent it in to me.

FREDERICK: She needn't have sent you the only new suit I've had since the war. Upon my soul, I think it's a bit thick.

WILLIAM: Well, you didn't like the suit I wore yesterday. You can't expect me to go about in fig-leaves unless you have the house properly warmed.

FREDERICK: If you'd had the decency to ask *me* you might have had this suit I've got on.

WILLIAM: Thanks, but I don't altogether like that one. It's a bit baggy at the knees for me.

FREDERICK: You're very much mistaken if you think you're going to wear all the new clothes and I'm going to wear all the old ones.

WILLIAM: If you're going to be shirty about it, where the devil did you get that pin?

FREDERICK: Oh, Victoria gave it me on my birthday.

WILLIAM: Well, it's mine. She gave it me on my birthday first. And where did you get those links?

FREDERICK: Victoria gave them to me as a Christmas present.

WILLIAM: Oh, did she? She gave them to me as a Christmas present before she gave them to you. You jolly well take them off.

FREDERICK: I'll see you blowed first. At your death you left everything to her in your will. If she chose to give them to me it's no business of yours.

WILLIAM: Well, I'm not going to argue about it, but I think it's dashed bad form to swank about in a dead man's jewellery.

FREDERICK: By the way, did you ever have a hammered gold cigarette-case?

WILLIAM: Rather. That was Victoria's wedding present to me. Did you get it too?

FREDERICK: Thrifty woman, Victoria.

WILLIAM: I say, unless I have a fire I shall turn into the Albert Memorial.

FREDERICK: Apply a match and see what happens.

WILLIAM: Thanks—I will.

[He strikes a match and lights the fire. The flames leap up.]

FREDERICK: Now I'll take my coat off. Victoria will be furious.

WILLIAM: That's your look out. You'll have to take the responsibility.

FREDERICK: It's got nothing to do with me. You're the master of this house.

WILLIAM: Not at all. I am but an honoured guest.

FREDERICK: Oh no, the moment you appeared I sank into insignificance.

WILLIAM: My dear fellow, where did I sleep last night? In the spare bedroom. That proves conclusively that I am a guest and nothing more.

FREDERICK: And where the devil do you think I slept? Here.

WILLIAM: Why did you do that? You were perfectly sober when I went to bed.

FREDERICK: Victoria said I couldn't sleep in the next room to hers now you were back.

WILLIAM: Oh, well, I dare say you made yourself very comfortable on the sofa.

FREDERICK: Look at the damned thing.

WILLIAM: By the way, what's the matter with the furniture?

FREDERICK: When you were killed Victoria was naturally very much upset, so she had the drawing-room re-decorated.

WILLIAM: I dare say I'm not very bright so early in the morning, but I don't quite see the connection.

FREDERICK: You see, the old room had too many painful associations. She wanted to distract her mind.

WILLIAM: Oh, I was under the impression that you'd undertaken that.

FREDERICK: [*With dignity.*] I was sympathetic. That is surely what you would have liked me to be.

WILLIAM: Of course. I'm not blaming you.

FREDERICK: If you'd seen Victoria in tears you couldn't expect a man not to try and console her.

WILLIAM: She's the only woman I ever knew who looks as pretty when she cries as when she smiles. It's a great power.

FREDERICK: I knew you'd take it like a sensible man.

WILLIAM: Quite so.

FREDERICK: When would you like me to clear out?

WILLIAM: My dear fellow, why should you wish to do that? Surely you don't for a moment imagine that I shall be in the way. I propose to make my visit quite a brief one.

FREDERICK: I'm sorry to hear that. Victoria will be disappointed. But of course that's no concern of mine. You and your wife must arrange that between you.

WILLIAM: My dear old thing, you entirely misunderstand me. I am not the man to come between husband and wife.

FREDERICK: What the devil do you mean?

WILLIAM: Well, if it comes to that, what the devil do you mean?

[*VICTORIA comes in. She now wears a most becoming morning dress. She carries a box of chocolates.*]

VICTORIA: Good-morning.

[*She goes to WILLIAM and gives him her cheek to kiss.*]

WILLIAM: Good-morning.

VICTORIA: Good-morning.

[*She goes up to FREDERICK and gives him the other cheek to kiss.*]

FREDERICK: Good-morning.

VICTORIA: [*With a nod of the head towards WILLIAM.*] I went to him first because he's been away so long.

FREDERICK: Naturally. And he was your husband long before I was.

VICTORIA: I don't want either of you to be jealous of the other. I adore you both and I'm not going to show any favouritism.

FREDERICK: I don't see why he should have the spare bedroom, while I have to double up on the drawing-room sofa.

WILLIAM: I like that. What about the fatted calf?

FREDERICK: Not unless you've brought your coupons with you.

VICTORIA: [*Catching sight of the fire.*] Who lit that fire?

FREDERICK: He did.

WILLIAM: It was your match.

[*VICTORIA draws up a chair and sits down in front of the fire in such a way as to prevent any warmth from getting into the room.*]

VICTORIA: [*Eating a chocolate.*] Of course you don't care if we run so short of coal that my wretched babies die of double pneumonia. It's simply criminal to have a fire here.

WILLIAM: I'm tortured by the pangs of remorse. But, need you monopolize it?

VICTORIA: If there is a fire I may as well get some benefit out of it.

FREDERICK: Are those chocolates you're eating, Victoria?

VICTORIA: Yes, Bobbie Curtis sent them to me. They're delicious.

FREDERICK: Are they?

VICTORIA: It's so hard to get good chocolates just now.

FREDERICK: I know it is. I haven't tasted one for months.

VICTORIA: [*Biting a chocolate.*] Oh, this one's soft inside. How hateful. Would either of you like it?

WILLIAM: [*Ironically.*] It seems a pity to waste it, Victoria.

VICTORIA: [*Eating it.*] I dare say you're right. One oughtn't to be too particular in war-time.

WILLIAM: Ah, I suppose that's what you thought when you married Freddie.

VICTORIA: I did that for your sake, darling. He was such a pal of yours.

FREDERICK: She was simply inconsolable when you were killed.

WILLIAM: It's lucky you were there to console her.

VICTORIA: It was Freddie who broke the news to me. He thought of the memorial service. He came to see me twice a day.

WILLIAM: And with your practical mind I suppose you thought it hardly worth his while to wear out shoe-leather when a trilling ceremony might save him the journey.

VICTORIA: Of course we waited the year. I told him he mustn't think of it till the year was up.

WILLIAM: With leather so expensive? But you always had nice feelings, Victoria.

VICTORIA: You know how helpless I am without a man. I knew you wouldn't wish me to remain a widow.

FREDERICK: I felt I was the proper person to look after her.

WILLIAM: The way you've both of you sacrificed yourselves for my sake is almost more than I can bear. I can only hope that you didn't have to force your inclinations too much?

FREDERICK: What do you mean by that?

WILLIAM: Well, since it appears you married entirely for my sake, I presume there was nothing between you but—shall we say esteem?

VICTORIA: Oh, but, Bill darling, didn't I tell you that I adored Freddie? It was his wonderful friendship for you that won my heart.

FREDERICK: She was so devoted to you, Bill, I should have been a brute not to care for her.

WILLIAM: One would almost think you fell in love with one another.

VICTORIA: Only over your dead body, darling.

FREDERICK: I should have thought you'd be rather touched by it.

WILLIAM: It gives me quite a lump in my throat.

FREDERICK: And Victoria never forgot you, old man. Did you, Victoria?

VICTORIA: Never.

FREDERICK: I know quite well that I only came second in her heart. So long as you were round and about she would never have thought of me.

WILLIAM: Oh, I don't know about that. Even the most constant woman likes a change now and then.

FREDERICK: No, no. I know Victoria's faithful heart. She can never really love any man but you. Victoria, you know how I adore you. You are the only woman in the world for me. But I realize that there is only one thing for me to do. Bill has come back. There is only one course open to me as a gentleman and a man of honour. It is a bitter, bitter sacrifice, but I am equal to it. I renounce all rights in you. I will go away, a wiser and a sadder man, and leave you to Bill. Good-bye, Victoria. Wipe your mouth and give me one more kiss before we part for ever.

VICTORIA: Oh, how beautiful of you, Freddie. What a soul you've got.

FREDERICK: Good-bye, Victoria. Forget me and live happily with a better man than I.

VICTORIA: I shall never forget you, Freddie. Good-bye. Go quickly or I shall break down.

[WILLIAM *has planted himself firmly in front of the door.*

FREDERICK *goes up to him with outstretched hand.*

FREDERICK: Good-bye, Bill. Be kind to her. I couldn't do this for anyone but you.

WILLIAM: [*Deliberately.*] Nothing doing.

FREDERICK: I am going out of your life for ever.

WILLIAM: Not in those boots.

FREDERICK: Damn it all, what's the matter with them? They're not yours.

WILLIAM: A figure of speech, my lad.

FREDERICK: I don't think this is exactly the moment for flippancy. You get away from that door.

WILLIAM: You shall only pass over my dead body.

FREDERICK: What's the good of that? I shouldn't get the chance then.

VICTORIA: Bill, why prolong a painful scene?

WILLIAM: My dear Victoria, I am not the man to accept a sacrifice like that. No. The War Office has decided that I'm dead. You've had a memorial service. You've redecorated the drawing-room. You are happy. It would be monstrously selfish if I disturbed a state of things which is eminently satisfactory to you both. I will not come between you.

VICTORIA: Oh, Bill, how noble.

WILLIAM: Victoria, I am a gentleman and a soldier. This being that you see before you, notwithstanding the tolerable suit he wears, is a disembodied wraith. To all

intents and purposes I am as dead as mutton. I will remain so.

FREDERICK: Victoria will never be happy with me now that you've come back.

WILLIAM: Not another word. She is yours.

FREDERICK: My dear Bill, you know me very little. I am lazy, selfish, bad-tempered, mean, gouty, and pre-disposed to cancer, tuberculosis, and diabetes.

WILLIAM: This is terrible, my poor Freddie. You must take the greatest care of your health, and dear Victoria will do her best to correct your defects of character.

FREDERICK: If you really loved her you wouldn't expose her to the certain misery that it must be to live with a man like me.

WILLIAM: Freddie, old man, I can no longer conceal from you that with a constitution ruined by dissipation in my youth and broken by the ravages of war I have not much longer to live. Besides, Victoria knows only too well that I am vindictive and overbearing, extravagant, violent and mendacious.

VICTORIA: I understand it all. You're both so noble. You're both so heroic. You're both so unselfish.

[TAYLOR comes in.

TAYLOR: If you please, ma'am, someone to see you from the Alexandra Employment Agency.

[She hands her a slip of paper.

VICTORIA: Oh, send her in at once.

TAYLOR: Very good, madam.

[Exit.

VICTORIA: A cook. A cook. A cook.

FREDERICK: Good business. Is she plain or good?

VICTORIA: Plain and good.

WILLIAM: How like a woman.

[TAYLOR *shows in* MRS. POGSON *and closes the door behind her.* MRS. POGSON *is large and heavy and authoritative. She is dressed like the widow of an undertaker.*

MRS. POGSON: Good-morning.

VICTORIA: Good-morning.

[MRS. POGSON *looks round her, and seeing a bandy chair sits down on it.*

MRS. POGSON: I 'ave your name on the list the Alexandra gave me as requiring a cook. I don't know as I very much like this neighbourhood, but I thought I'd just pop in and see if the position looked like suiting me.

VICTORIA: [*Ingratiatingly.*] I'm sure you'd find it a very nice one.

MRS. POGSON: I couldn't stand them air-raids and I made up my mind I wouldn't come back to London not so long as the war lasted. And the streets all dark and I don't know what all. But of course I prefer London.

VICTORIA: Naturally.

MRS. POGSON: And now that the war's over if I can find anything that suits me I don't mind coming back. Why did the last cook leave you?

VICTORIA: She was going to be married.

MRS. POGSON: Ah, that's what all you ladies say. Of course, it may be so, and on the other 'and it may not.

VICTORIA: She told me she hadn't had a nicer place for the last three months.

MRS. POGSON: Now before we go any further I'd just like to know one thing. Have you got a garage?

VICTORIA: Well, we have, but there are no cars in it. We sold our car.

MRS. POGSON: Oh, well, that would be very convenient. I always bring my Ford with me.

VICTORIA: Yes, of course.

MRS. POGSON: Do you keep men-servants?

VICTORIA: No, I'm afraid not.

MRS. POGSON: [*Severely.*] I've always been used to men-servants.

VICTORIA: You see, since the war . . .

MRS. POGSON: Oh, you don't 'ave to tell me. I know it's very difficult. And I suppose you 'aven't got a kitchen-maid either?

VICTORIA: One can't get one for love or money.

MRS. POGSON: That's a thing I shall never forgive the Government for. Taking all them girls and putting them in munitions. Still, that's not your fault, I will say that. There's many cooks I know as say they *will not* go without a kitchen-maid, but I say, it's war-time and everyone ought to do his bit. If I must do without a kitchen-maid, well, I will do without a kitchen-maid.

VICTORIA: I think it's very patriotic of you.

MRS. POGSON: Of course, I leave you to make any arrangements you like about lighting the kitchen fire. All I ask is that it should be alight when I come down in the morning.

VICTORIA: Oh! Naturally, I see your point. But I don't quite know how I should manage about that.

MRS. POGSON: In my last position the gentleman of the house lit the fire every morning.

VICTORIA: Oh, I hadn't thought of that.

WILLIAM: I wouldn't if I were you, Victoria.

MRS. POGSON: A very nice gentleman he was too. Brought me up a cup of tea and a slice of thin bread and butter every day before I got up.

VICTORIA: I'm sure we'd do everything we could to make you comfortable.

MRS. POGSON: What cooking would you require?

VICTORIA: I'm sure you'd satisfy us there. I can see at once that you're a first-rate cook.

MRS. POGSON: I don't 'old with a lot of fancy things meself, not in war-time. I say, be thankful you get anything to eat at all.

VICTORIA: Of course, I know it's very difficult to have a great variety now. I'm sure you'll do the best you can. We're out for luncheon a good deal and we dine at eight.

MRS. POGSON: Of course, you can please yourselves there, but I never do any cooking after middle-day.

VICTORIA: That's rather awkward.

MRS. POGSON: If you don't think I'll suit you I needn't waste any more of my time. I've got ten to a dozen ladies that I must interview this morning.

VICTORIA: Oh, I wouldn't make a point of that. I dare say we can arrange our hours to suit you.

MRS. POGSON: Well, I always serve up my dinner at one o'clock. A nice little bit of meat and a milk pudding. And should you want anything after that you can always 'ave the cold meat for your supper and any little sweet I 'appen to 'ave in the kitchen.

VICTORIA: I see. And what—what wages are you asking?

MRS. POGSON: I don't know as I'm asking any wages. I'm prepared to accept a salary of two pound a week.

VICTORIA: That's rather more than I've been in the habit of paying.

MRS. POGSON: If you aren't prepared to pay that there are plenty as are.

VICTORIA: We won't quarrel about that. I'm sure you're worth the money.

MRS. POGSON: I don't think there are any more questions I need ask you.

VICTORIA: No, I think that's everything. When would you be able to come in?

MRS. POGSON: I'll just go and see these other ladies and see what they 'ave to offer me, and then if I come to the conclusion that you'll suit me I'll just drop you a line.

VICTORIA: I do hope you'll come here. I'm sure you'd be happy.

MRS. POGSON: That's what I always say, the great thing is to be 'appy. And I like your face. I don't mind telling you that I've taken quite a fancy to you.

VICTORIA: I'm very glad to hear it.

MRS. POGSON: There, I was just going away and I knew I 'ad one more question to ask you. My 'ead's like a perfect sieve this morning. How many are you in the family?

VICTORIA: Well, I have two children, but they give no trouble at all, and just at present they're not staying here.

MRS. POGSON: Oh, I don't mind children. I've had too many meself to do that.

VICTORIA: And then there's just me and these two gentlemen.

MRS. POGSON: I suppose you are married to one of them.

VICTORIA: I don't know what you mean by that. I'm married to both.

MRS. POGSON: Both? Legally?

VICTORIA: Of course.

MRS. POGSON: Well, I do call that going it. [*With growing indignation.*] If it 'ad been just a gentleman friend I'd 'ave 'ad nothing to say. I've lived in the very best families and I'm quite used to that. It keeps the lady quiet and good-tempered and she ain't always fussing about one thing and another. And if he lives in the 'ouse she ain't likely to keep the dinner waiting for 'alf an hour every other day. But if you're married to 'im that's quite another thing. It's not justice. If you ladies think

you're going to 'ave two 'usbands while many a working woman can't even get one—well, all I say is, it's not justice. I've bin a Conservative all me life, but thank God I've got a vote now, and I tell you straight what I'm going to do, I'm going to vote Labour.

[She flaunts out of the room and slams the door behind her.]

WILLIAM: Bang!

VICTORIA: [*Furiously.*] The position is intolerable. I must have one husband. There are all sorts of ways in which a husband is indispensable. But only one. I cannot and will not have two.

FREDERICK: I have an idea.

WILLIAM: It's sure to be a rotten one.

FREDERICK: Let's draw lots.

WILLIAM: I knew it was a rotten one.

VICTORIA: How d'you mean, Freddie?

FREDERICK: Well, we'll take two pieces of paper and make a cross on one of them. Then we'll fold them up and put them in a hat. We'll draw, and the one who draws the cross gets Victoria.

VICTORIA: [*Mollified.*] That'll be rather thrilling.

WILLIAM: I'd sooner toss for it. I'm lucky at tossing.

FREDERICK: Do you mean to say you funk it?

WILLIAM: I don't exactly funk it. It's an awful risk to take.

VICTORIA: It'll be so romantic. Get some paper, Freddie.

FREDERICK: All right.

WILLIAM: [*Worried.*] I don't like it. This isn't my lucky day. I saw the new moon through glass. I knew something was going wrong the moment I opened my egg this morning.

[FREDERICK goes to a desk and takes out a sheet of paper which he tears in two. Then with his back turned he draws a cross.]

FREDERICK: Whoever draws the blank paper renounces all claim to Victoria. He vanishes from the scene like a puff of smoke. He will never be heard of again.

WILLIAM: I don't like it. I repeat that I only do it under protest.

VICTORIA: Now, Bill, don't be disagreeable the moment you come back.

FREDERICK: You'll have plenty of time for that during the next forty years.

VICTORIA: You seem rather above yourself, Freddie. Supposing *you* draw the blank?

FREDERICK: I saw a dappled horse this morning. What shall we put them in?

VICTORIA: The waste-paper basket is the best thing.

FREDERICK: I'll get it. Now you quite understand. One of these papers has a cross on it. I will put the two papers in the basket, and Victoria shall hold it. It is agreed that whoever draws a blank shall leave the house at once.

WILLIAM: [*Faintly.*] Yes.

FREDERICK: [*Handing her the basket.*] Here you are, Victoria.

WILLIAM: [*With agitation.*] Shake 'em well.

VICTORIA: All right. I say, isn't this thrilling?

FREDERICK: You draw first, Bill.

WILLIAM: [*Shaking like a leaf.*] No, I can't. I really can't.

FREDERICK: It's your right. You are Victoria's first husband.

VICTORIA: He's right there, Bill. You must have the first dip in the lucky bag.

WILLIAM: This is awful. I'm sweating like a pig.

VICTORIA: It's too exciting. My heart is simply going pit-a-pat. I wonder which of you will get me.

WILLIAM: [*Hesitating.*] Going over the top is nothing to it.

FREDERICK: Courage, old man, courage.

WILLIAM: It's no good, I can't. You must remember that my nerves are all to pieces after three years in a German prison.

VICTORIA: I see how much you love me, Bill.

FREDERICK: Shut your eyes, man, and make a plunge for the basket.

WILLIAM: The only thing is to get it over. I wish I'd been a better man.

[He draws out one of the pieces of paper and FREDERICK takes the other. For a moment he looks at it nervously, unable to bring himself to unfold it. FREDERICK opens his, gives a sudden cry, and starts back.]

FREDERICK: *[Dramatically.]* Blank. Blank. Blank.

[WILLIAM gives a start, and quickly unravels the paper in his hand. He stares at it in horror.]

WILLIAM: My God!

VICTORIA: Oh, my poor Freddie!

FREDERICK: *[With enormous feeling.]* Don't pity me, Victoria. I want all my courage now. I've lost you and I must bid you good-bye for ever.

VICTORIA: Oh, Freddie, this is too dreadful! You must come and see me from time to time.

FREDERICK: I couldn't. That is more than I could bear. I shall never forget you. You are the only woman I have ever loved.

[At these words WILLIAM looks up and observes him curiously.]

VICTORIA: You'll never love another, will you? I shouldn't like that.

FREDERICK: How could I love anyone after you? Why, you might as well ask a man to see when the sun has gone down.

WILLIAM: He can turn on the electric light, you know.

FREDERICK: Ah, you can jest. I am a broken-hearted and a ruined man.

WILLIAM: I was only suggesting the possibility of consolation.

VICTORIA: I don't think that's very nice of you, Bill. I thought what he said extremely poetic. Besides, I don't want him to be consoled.

FREDERICK: Give me one last kiss, Victoria.

VICTORIA: Darling!

[He seizes her in his arms and kisses her.]

FREDERICK: *[The hero of romance.]* Good-bye. I go into the night.

WILLIAM: Oh, aren't you going at once?

FREDERICK: I am.

WILLIAM: Well, it happens to be the middle of the day.

FREDERICK: *[With dignity.]* I was speaking in metaphor.

WILLIAM: Before you go you might just let me have a look at that other bit of paper, the one with the blank on it.

FREDERICK: *[Walking towards the door.]* Oh, don't delay me with foolish trifling.

WILLIAM: *[Intercepting him.]* I'm sorry to detain you.

FREDERICK: *[Trying to dodge round him.]* Why d'you want to see it?

WILLIAM: *[Preventing him.]* Mere curiosity.

FREDERICK: *[Trying the other side.]* Really, Bill, I don't know how you can be so heartless as to give way to curiosity when my heart is one great aching wound.

WILLIAM: I should like to have the two pieces framed, an interesting souvenir of an important occasion.

FREDERICK: Any other piece will do just as well. I threw that one in the fire.

WILLIAM: Oh no, you didn't. You put it in your pocket.

FREDERICK: I've had enough of this. Can't you see that I'm a desperate man?

WILLIAM: Not half so desperate as I am. If you don't give me that bit of paper quietly I'll take it from you.

FREDERICK: Go to blazes!

WILLIAM: Give it up.

[He makes a dash for FREDERICK, who dodges; he pursues him round the room.]

VICTORIA: What's the matter? Have you both gone mad?

WILLIAM: You'll have to sooner or later.

FREDERICK: I'll see you damned first.

VICTORIA: Why don't you give it him?

FREDERICK: Not if I know it.

VICTORIA: Why not?

FREDERICK: I won't have my feelings hurt like this.

WILLIAM: I'll hurt a lot more than your feelings in a minute.

[FREDERICK makes a sudden bolt for the door, but WILLIAM catches him.]

WILLIAM: Got cher. Now will you give it up?

FREDERICK: Not on your life.

WILLIAM: I'll break your bally arm if you don't.

FREDERICK: *[Writhing.]* Oh, you devill! Stop it. You're hurting me.

WILLIAM: I'm trying to.

FREDERICK: Hit him on the head with the poker, Victoria.

WILLIAM: Don't be unlady-like, Victoria.

FREDERICK: You filthy Boche. All right, here it is.

[WILLIAM lets him go and FREDERICK takes the paper out of his pocket. Just as WILLIAM thinks he is going to give it him, he puts it in his mouth.]

WILLIAM: *[Seizing him by the throat.]* Take it out of your mouth.

[FREDERICK *takes it out and throws it on the floor.*

FREDERICK: I don't know if you call yourself a gentleman.

[WILLIAM *takes up the paper and unfolds it.*

WILLIAM: You dirty dog.

VICTORIA: What's the matter?

[*He walks over and hands it to her.*

WILLIAM: Look.

VICTORIA: Why, it's got a cross on it.

WILLIAM: [*Indignantly.*] They both had crosses on them.

VICTORIA: I don't understand.

WILLIAM: Don't you? He was making quite sure that I shouldn't draw a blank.

[VICTORIA *looks at him in astonishment. There is a moment's pause.*

FREDERICK: [*Magnanimously.*] I did it for your sake, Victoria. I knew that your heart was set on Bill, only you couldn't bear to hurt my feelings, so I thought I'd make it easier for you.

VICTORIA: That was just like you, Freddie. You have a charming nature.

WILLIAM: [*Acidly.*] It almost brings tears to my eyes.

FREDERICK: I'm made that way. I can't help sacrificing myself for others.

[TAYLOR *comes in.*

TAYLOR: May I speak to you for a minute, madam.

VICTORIA: Not now. I'm busy.

TAYLOR: I'm afraid it's very urgent, madam.

VICTORIA: Oh, very well, I'll come. Don't say anything important till I come back.

[TAYLOR *holds the door open for her, and she goes out.*

FREDERICK: How did you guess?

WILLIAM: You were so devilish calm about it.

FREDERICK: That was the calm of despair.

[WILLIAM *is sitting on the sofa. He happens to put his hand behind him and feels something hard. With a puzzled expression he puts down his hand between the seat and the back of the sofa and draws out first one boot and then another.*

WILLIAM: My boots!

FREDERICK: I knew I'd put them somewhere.

WILLIAM: You didn't put them anywhere. You hid them, you dirty dog.

FREDERICK: It's a lie. Why the dickens should I hide your rotten old boots?

WILLIAM: You were afraid I'd do a bunk.

FREDERICK: You needn't get ratty about it. I only ascribed to you the disinterested motives that I—that I have myself. I may be wrong, but, after all, it's a noble error.

WILLIAM: One might almost think you didn't want Victoria.

[FREDERICK *looks at him for a moment thoughtfully, then he makes up his mind to make a clean breast of it.*

FREDERICK: Bill, old chap, you know I'm not the sort of man to say a word against my wife.

WILLIAM: Nor am I the sort of man to listen to a word against mine.

FREDERICK: But, hang it all, if a fellow can't discuss his wife dispassionately with her first husband, who can he discuss her with?

WILLIAM: I can't imagine unless it's with her second.

FREDERICK: Tell me what you really think of Victoria.

WILLIAM: She's the sweetest little woman in the world.

FREDERICK: No man could want a better wife.

WILLIAM: She's pretty.

FREDERICK: Charming.

WILLIAM: Delightful.

FREDERICK: I confess that sometimes I've thought it hard that when I wanted a thing it was selfishness, and when she wanted it, it was only her due.

WILLIAM: I don't mind admitting that sometimes I used to wonder why it was only natural of me to sacrifice my inclinations, but in her the proof of a beautiful nature.

FREDERICK: It has tried me now and then that in every difference of opinion I should always be wrong and she should always be right.

WILLIAM: Sometimes I couldn't quite understand why my engagements were made to be broken, while nothing in the world must interfere with hers.

FREDERICK: I have asked myself occasionally why my time was of no importance while hers was so precious.

WILLIAM: I did sometimes wish I could call my soul my own.

FREDERICK: The fact is, I'm not worthy of her, Bill. As you so justly say, no man could want a better wife. . . .

WILLIAM: [*Interrupting.*] No, you said that.

FREDERICK: But I'm fed up. If you'd been dead I'd have seen it through like a gentleman, but you've turned up like a bad shilling. Now you take up the white man's burden.

WILLIAM: I'll see you damned first.

FREDERICK: She must have one husband.

WILLIAM: Look here, there's only one thing to do. She must choose between us.

FREDERICK: That's not giving me a chance.

WILLIAM: I don't know what you mean by that. I think it's extraordinarily magnanimous on my part.

FREDERICK: Magnanimous be hanged. I've got a charming nature and I'm extremely handsome. Victoria will naturally choose me.

WILLIAM: Heaven knows I'm not vain, but I've always been given to understand that I'm an almost perfect specimen of manly beauty. My conversation is not only amusing, but instructive.

FREDERICK: I'd rather toss for it.

WILLIAM: I'm not going to risk anything like that. I've had enough of your hanky-panky.

FREDERICK: I thought I was dealing with a gentleman.

WILLIAM: Here she comes.

[**VICTORIA** comes in. *She is in a temper.*

VICTORIA: All the servants have given notice now.

FREDERICK: They haven't!

VICTORIA: I've done everything in the world for them. I've given them double wages. I've fed them on the fat of the land. I've given them my own butter and my own sugar to eat.

FREDERICK: Only because they were bad for your figure, Victoria.

VICTORIA: They didn't know that. I've given them all the evenings out that I really didn't want them. I've let them bring the whole British Army to tea here. And now they give me notice.

WILLIAM: It's a bit thick, I must say.

VICTORIA: I argued with them, I appealed to them, I practically went down on my knees to them. They wouldn't listen. They're going to walk out of the house this afternoon.

WILLIAM: Oh, well, Freddie and I will do the housework until you get some more.

VICTORIA: Do you know that it's harder to get a parlour-maid than a peerage? Why, every day at Paddington Registry Office you'll see a queue of old bachelors taking out licences to marry their cooks. It's the only way to keep them.

WILLIAM: Well, Victoria, we've decided that there's only one thing to be done. You must choose between us.

VICTORIA: How can I? I adore you both. Besides, there's so little to choose between you.

WILLIAM: Oh, I don't know about that. Freddie has a charming nature and he's extremely handsome.

FREDERICK: I wish you wouldn't say that, Bill. Heaven knows you're not vain, but I must tell you to your face that you're an almost perfect specimen of manly beauty, and your conversation is not only amusing but instructive.

VICTORIA: I don't want to hurt anybody's feelings.

FREDERICK: Before you decide, I feel it only fair to make a confession to you. I could not bear it if our future life were founded on a lie. Victoria, in my department there is a stenographer. She is of the feminine gender. She has blue eyes and little yellow curls at the nape of her neck. The rest I leave to your imagination.

VICTORIA: How abominable. And I always thought you had such a nice mind.

FREDERICK: I am unworthy of you. I know it only too, too well. You can never forgive me.

WILLIAM: Dirty dog.

VICTORIA: That certainly simplifies matters. I don't quite see myself as the third lady in the back row of a harem.

WILLIAM: You would run no risk of being that in Canada. Women are scarce in Manitoba.

VICTORIA: What *are* you talking about?

WILLIAM: I have come to the conclusion that England offers me no future now the war is over. I shall resign my commission. The empire needs workers, and I am ready to take my part in reconstruction. Make me the happiest of men, Victoria, and we'll emigrate together.

VICTORIA: To Canada?

FREDERICK: Where the sables come from.

VICTORIA: Not the best ones.

WILLIAM: I shall buy a farm. I think it would be a very good plan if you employed your leisure in learning how to cook the simple fare on which we shall live. I believe you can wash?

VICTORIA: [*With asperity.*] Luce.

WILLIAM: But I think you should also learn how to milk cows.

VICTORIA: I don't like cows.

WILLIAM: I see the idea appeals to you. It will be a wonderful life, Victoria. You'll light the fire and scrub the floors, and you'll cook the dinner and wash the clothes. You'll vote.

VICTORIA: And what shall I do in my spare moments?

WILLIAM: We will cultivate your mind by reading the *Encyclopædia Britannica* together. Take a good look at us, Victoria, and say which of us it's to be.

VICTORIA: To tell you the truth, I don't see why it should be either.

FREDERICK: Hang it all, it must be one or the other.

VICTORIA: I think no one can deny that since the day I married you I've sacrificed myself in every mortal way. I've worked myself to the bone to make you comfortable. Very few men have ever had such a wife as I've been to both of you! But one must think of oneself sometimes.

WILLIAM: How true.

VICTORIA: The war is over now, and I think I've done my bit. I've married two D.S.O.'s. Now I want to marry a Rolls-Royce.

FREDERICK: [*Astonished.*] But I thought you adored us.

VICTORIA: Well, you see, I adore you both. It's six of one

and half a dozen of the other, and the result is . . .

WILLIAM: A wash-out.

FREDERICK: Hang it all, I think it's a bit thick. Do you mean to say that you've fixed up to marry somebody else behind our back?

VICTORIA: You know I wouldn't do a thing like that, Freddie.

FREDERICK: Well, I don't tumble.

VICTORIA: My dear Freddie, have you ever studied the domestic habits of the unicorn?

FREDERICK: I am afraid my education was very much neglected.

VICTORIA: The unicorn is a shy and somewhat timid animal, and it is impossible to catch him with the snares of the hunter. But he is strangely impressionable to the charms of the fair sex. When he hears the frou-frou of a silk petticoat he forgets his native caution. In short, a pretty woman can lead him by the nose.

[TAYLOR comes in.

TAYLOR: Mr. Leicester Paton is downstairs in his car, madam.

VICTORIA: Is it the Rolls-Royce?

TAYLOR: I think it is, madam.

VICTORIA: [*With a smile of triumph.*] Say I'll come down at once.

TAYLOR: Very good, madam. [Exit.

VICTORIA: The unicorn's going to take me out to luncheon.

[*She makes a long nose at them and goes out.*

THE THIRD ACT

The kitchen. At one end is a range, with a gas-stove; at the other end a dresser on which are plates and dishes. At the back a door leads out to the area and near it is a window, with iron bars, through which can be seen the area steps and persons ascending and descending them. In the middle of the room is a kitchen table, and here and there kitchen chairs. There is linoleum on the floor. The place is clean, sanitary, and cheerful.

WILLIAM *is sitting on one of the chairs with his feet on another, reading a thin, paper-bound novel of the sort that is published at threepence and sold by the newsagent round the corner. FREDERICK comes in with a scuttle full of coals.*

FREDERICK: [*Putting down the scuttle.*] I say, these coals weigh about a ton. You might carry them upstairs.

WILLIAM: [*Cheerfully.*] I might, but I'm not going to.

FREDERICK: I wouldn't ask you, only since I was wounded in the arm serving my country I haven't the strength I had once.

WILLIAM: [*Suspiciously.*] Which arm were you wounded in?

FREDERICK: [*Promptly.*] Both arms.

WILLIAM: Carry the coals on your head then. I believe that's the best way really. And they say it improves the figure.

FREDERICK: You heartless devil.

WILLIAM: I'd do it like a shot, old man, only the doctor said it was very bad for my heart to carry heavy weights.

FREDERICK: What's the matter with your heart? You said you were wounded in the head.

WILLIAM: Besides, it isn't my work. I'm doing the cooking. You really can't expect me to do housework as well.

FREDERICK: *Are* you doing the cooking? It looks to me as though you were just sitting about doing nothing. I don't see why I should have to sweat my life out.

WILLIAM: You see, you have no organization. Housework's perfectly simple, only you must have organization. I have organization. That's my secret.

FREDERICK: I was a mug to say I'd do the housework. I might have known you'd freeze on to a soft job if there was one.

WILLIAM: I naturally undertook to do what I could do best. That is one of the secrets of organization. Cooking is an art. Any fool can do housework.

FREDERICK: I'll give you a thick ear in a minute. You just try and get a shine on a pair of boots and see if it's easy.

WILLIAM: I don't believe you know how to shine a pair of boots. Did you spit on them?

FREDERICK: No, only on the silver.

WILLIAM: You just look nippy and get the table laid while I finish my book.

FREDERICK: [*Gloomily.*] Is it luncheon or dinner?

WILLIAM: I don't know yet, but we're going to have it down here because it's easier for dishing up. Organization again.

FREDERICK: What does Victoria say to that?

WILLIAM: I haven't told her yet.

FREDERICK: She's in an awful temper this morning.

WILLIAM: Why?

FREDERICK: Because the water in the bathroom wasn't hot.

WILLIAM: Wasn't it?

FREDERICK: You know very well it wasn't.

WILLIAM: I think cold baths are much better for people.

There'd be a damned sight less illness about if cold baths were compulsory.

FREDERICK: Tell that to the horse-marines. You were too lazy to get up in time. That's all there is to it.

WILLIAM: I wish you'd get on with your work instead of interrupting me all the time.

FREDERICK: You don't look as if you were so busy as all that.

WILLIAM: I want to find out if the nursery governess married the duke after all. You should read this after I've finished it.

FREDERICK: I don't have time for reading. When I take on a job I like to do it properly.

WILLIAM: I wish you wouldn't mumble.

FREDERICK: What is there for lunch? [*He goes over to the stove and takes a cover off a saucepan.*] What's this mess?

WILLIAM: Those are potatoes. You might give one of them a jab with a fork to see how they're getting on.

FREDERICK: It seems rather unfriendly, doesn't it?

WILLIAM: Oh no, they're used to it.

[*FREDERICK takes a fork and tries to transfix a potato.*]

FREDERICK: Damn it all, they won't stop still. They're wriggling all over the place. Wriggle, wriggle, little tater. How I wonder who's your mater. Poetry! Come here, you little devil. Woa there.

WILLIAM: I say, don't make such a row. This is awfully exciting. He's plunged both his hands into her hair.

FREDERICK: Dirty trick, I call it.

WILLIAM: Why? She'd washed it.

FREDERICK: [*Bringing out a potato.*] Damn it all, they're not skinned.

WILLIAM: I suppose you mean peeled.

FREDERICK: If there's anything I dislike it's potatoes in their skins.

WILLIAM: It's simply waste to peel potatoes. I never peel potatoes.

FREDERICK: Is that organization?

WILLIAM: Well, if you ask me, that's just what it is.

FREDERICK: Ever since I've been at the War Office I've heard fellows talk of organization, but I never could find anyone to tell me just what it was. It's beginning to dawn on me now.

WILLIAM: [*Still reading.*] Well, what is it?

FREDERICK: I'm not going to tell you unless you listen.

WILLIAM: [*Looking up.*] He's just glued his lips to hers. Well?

FREDERICK: Organization means getting someone else to do your job for you if you can, and if you can't, letting it rip.

WILLIAM: I suppose you think you're funny.

FREDERICK: [*Putting the potato back in the saucepan.*] The steak smells as though it was almost done.

WILLIAM: Done? It's only been on about a quarter of an hour.

FREDERICK: But in a grill-room they do you steak in ten minutes.

WILLIAM: I don't care about that. You cook meat a quarter of an hour for every pound. I should have thought any fool knew that.

FREDERICK: What's that got to do with it?

WILLIAM: I bought three pounds of steak, so I'm going to cook it for three-quarters of an hour.

FREDERICK: Well, it looks to me as if it wanted eating now.

WILLIAM: That's only its cunning. It won't be ready for ages yet. I wish you'd let me get on with my story.

FREDERICK: [*Puzzled.*] But look here, if there were three steaks of a pound each you'd cook them a quarter of an hour each.

WILLIAM: Exactly. That's what I say. That comes to three-quarters of an hour.

FREDERICK: But, hang it all, it's the same quarter of an hour.

WILLIAM: You make me tired. You might just as well say that because three men can walk four miles an hour each man can walk twelve miles an hour.

FREDERICK: But that's just what I do say.

WILLIAM: Well, it's damned idiotic, that's all.

FREDERICK: No, but I mean exactly the opposite. That's what *you* say. You've got me confused now. We'll have to start all over again.

WILLIAM: I shall never finish this story if you go on like this.

FREDERICK: It's a very important matter. Let's get a pencil and a piece of paper and work it out. We must get it right.

WILLIAM: For goodness' sake go and clean knives or something, and don't bother your head about things that are no concern of yours.

FREDERICK: Who's going to eat the steak?

WILLIAM: You won't if you're not careful.

FREDERICK: If I'm careful I don't think I will.

WILLIAM: [*Beginning to grow peevish.*] Cooking has its rules like everything else, and it's just as little use arguing about them as arguing about women.

FREDERICK: Now look here, if you cut that steak into three, would there be three pounds of steak or not?

WILLIAM: Certainly not. There'd be three steaks of one pound, and that's quite another matter.

FREDERICK: But it would be the same steak.

WILLIAM: [*Emphatically.*] It wouldn't be the same steak. It would be an entirely different steak.

FREDERICK: Do you mean to tell me that if you had a steak of a hundred pounds you'd cook it for twenty-five hours?

WILLIAM: Yes, and if I had a steak a thousand pounds I'd cook it for ten days.

FREDERICK: It seems an awful waste of gas.

WILLIAM: I don't care about that, it's logic.

[*Enter VICTORIA.*]

VICTORIA: I really think it's too bad of you. I've been ringing the bell for the last quarter of an hour. There are two men in the house, and you neither of you pay the least attention.

WILLIAM: We were having an argument.

FREDERICK: Let me put it before you, Victoria.

WILLIAM: It has nothing to do with Victoria. I'm the cook, and I won't have anyone come interfering in my kitchen.

FREDERICK: You must do something, Victoria. The steak will be absolutely uneatable.

VICTORIA: I don't care. I never eat steak.

WILLIAM: It's all you'll get for luncheon.

VICTORIA: I shan't be here for luncheon.

WILLIAM: Why not?

VICTORIA: Because—because Mr. Leicester Paton has made me an offer of marriage and I have accepted it.

FREDERICK: But you've got two husbands already, Victoria.

VICTORIA: I imagine you'll both be gentlemen enough to put no obstacle in the way of my getting my freedom.

[*A ring is heard.*]

FREDERICK: Hulloo, who's that?

VICTORIA: That is my solicitor.

FREDERICK: Your what?

VICTORIA: I told him to come at one. Go and open the door, Freddie, will you?

FREDERICK: What the dickens does he want?

VICTORIA: He's going to fix up my divorce.

FREDERICK: You're not letting the grass grow under your feet.

[*He goes out.*]

WILLIAM: This is a desperate step you're taking, Victoria.

VICTORIA: I had to do something. You must see that it's quite impossible for a woman to live without servants. I had no one to do me up this morning.

WILLIAM: How on earth did you manage?

VICTORIA: I had to put on something that didn't need doing up..

WILLIAM: That seems an adequate way out of the difficulty.

VICTORIA: It so happens that the one frock that didn't need doing up was the one frock I didn't want to wear.

WILLIAM: You look ravishing in it all the same.

VICTORIA: [*Rather stiffly.*] I'd sooner you didn't pay me compliments, Bill.

WILLIAM: Why not?

VICTORIA: Well, now that I'm engaged to Leicester Paton I don't think it's very good form.

WILLIAM: Have you quite made up your mind to divorce me?

VICTORIA: Quite.

WILLIAM: In that case, I can almost look upon you as another man's wife.

VICTORIA: What do you mean by that?

WILLIAM: Only that I can make love to you without feeling a thundering ass.

VICTORIA: [*Smiling.*] I'm not going to let you make love to me.

WILLIAM: You can't prevent me from telling you that you're the loveliest thing that ever turned a poor man's head.

VICTORIA: I can close my ears.

WILLIAM: [*Taking her hands.*] Impossible, for I shall hold your hands.

VICTORIA: I shall scream.

WILLIAM: You can't, because I shall kiss your lips.

[*He does so.*]

VICTORIA: Oh, Bill, what a pity it is you were ever my husband. I'm sure you'd make a charming lover.

WILLIAM: I have often thought that is the better part.

VICTORIA: Take care. They're just coming. It would never do for my solicitor to find me in my husband's arms.

WILLIAM: It would be outrageous.

[*FREDERICK ushers in the visitor.* MR. A. B. RAHAM is a solicitor. There is nothing more to be said about him.

VICTORIA: How do you do, Mr. Raham? Do you know my husbands?

MR. RAHAM: I'm pleased to meet you, gentlemen. I dare say it would facilitate matters if I am told which of you is which, and which is the other.

VICTORIA: This is Major Cardew, my first husband, and this is my second husband, Major Lowndes.

MR. RAHAM: Ah, that makes it quite clear. Both Majors. Interesting coincidence.

WILLIAM: I suppose that Mrs. Lowndes has put you in possession of the facts, Mr. Raham?

MR. RAHAM: I think so. We had a long talk at my office yesterday.

FREDERICK: You can quite understand that it's a position of some delicacy for Mrs. Cardew.

MR. RAHAM: [*Puzzled.*] Mrs. Cardew? Where does Mrs. Cardew come in?

FREDERICK: This is Mrs. Cardew.

MR. RAHAM: Oh, I see what you mean. That, in short, is the difficulty. Is this lady Mrs. Cardew or Mrs. Lowndes? Well, the fact is, she has decided to be neither.

VICTORIA: I've just broken it to them.

WILLIAM: You find us still staggering from the shock.

FREDERICK: Staggering.

MR. RAHAM: She has determined to divorce you both. I have told her that this is not necessary, since she is obviously the wife of only one of you.

VICTORIA: [*Argumentatively.*] In that case, what am I to the other?

MR. RAHAM: Well, Mrs. Cardew, or shall we say Lowndes? I hardly like to mention it to a lady, but if you'll excuse me saying so, you're his concubine.

WILLIAM: I rather like that, it sounds so damned Oriental.

VICTORIA: [*Indignantly.*] I never heard of such a thing.

WILLIAM: Oh, Fatima, your face is like the full moon, and your eyes are like the eyes of a young gazelle. Come, dance to me to the sound of the lute.

VICTORIA: Well, that settles it. I shall divorce them both just to prove to everyone that they're both my husbands.

FREDERICK: I think it's just as well to take no risks.

MR. RAHAM: Do I understand that you two gentlemen are agreeable?

WILLIAM: Speaking for myself, I am prepared to sacrifice my feelings, deep as they are, to the happiness of Victoria.

MR. RAHAM: Very nicely and feelingly put.

VICTORIA: He always was a gentleman.

MR. RAHAM: [*To FREDERICK.*] Now you, Major Cardew.

FREDERICK: My name is Lowndes.

MR. RAHAM: My mistake. Of course you're Major Lowndes. I made a mental note of it when we were introduced. Cardew—camel-face. Lowndes—litigation. Pelmanism, you know.

FREDERICK: I see. It doesn't seem very effective, though.

MR. RAHAM: Anyhow, that is neither here nor there. Will you give this lady the freedom she desires?

FREDERICK: I will. [*With a puzzled look.*] When did I last say those words? [*Remembering.*] Of course, the marriage service.

MR. RAHAM: Well, so far so good. I am under the impression that when it comes to the point we shall not need to take both you gentlemen into court, but I quite agree with Mrs. Lowndes-Cardew that it will save time and trouble if we get up the case against both of you in the same way. Since you will neither of you defend the case, there is no need for you to go to the expense of legal advice, so I propose to go into the whole matter with you now.

VICTORIA: You can feel quite easy about taking Mr. Raham's advice. He has arranged more divorce cases than any man in England.

MR. RAHAM: I venture to say that there are few of the best families in this country that haven't made use of my services in one way or another. Outraged husband, deceived wife, co-respondent or intervener; it's hardly likely that anyone who is anyone won't figure sooner or later in one or other of these capacities. And although it's I as says it, if he's wise he comes to me. My maxim has always been: Do it quickly; don't let's have a lot of fuss and bother. And, just to show you how my system works, there are ladies for whom I've got a divorce from three or four successive husbands, and

never a word of scandal has sullied the purity of their fair name.

WILLIAM: You must be a very busy man.

MR. RAHAM: I assure you, Major, I'm one of the busiest men in London.

WILLIAM: Fortunately, some marriages are happy.

MR. RAHAM: Don't you believe it, Major Cardew. There are no happy marriages. But there are some that are tolerable.

VICTORIA: You are a pessimist, Mr. Raham. I have made both my husbands ideally happy.

MR. RAHAM: But I will come to the point. Though, perhaps, it is hardly necessary, I will point out to you gentlemen what the law of the country needs in order to free a couple who, for reasons which merely concern themselves, have decided that they prefer to part company. If a husband wishes to divorce his wife he need prove nothing but adultery, but the English law recognizes the natural polygamy of man, and when a wife desires to divorce her husband she must prove besides cruelty or desertion. Let us take these first. Do you wish the cause of offence to be cruelty *or* desertion?

VICTORIA: Personally, I should prefer desertion.

WILLIAM: Certainly. I should very much dislike to be cruel to you, Victoria.

FREDERICK: And you know I could never hurt a fly.

MR. RAHAM: Then we will settle on desertion. I think myself it is the more gentlemanly way, and besides, it is more easily proved. The procedure is excessively simple. Mrs. Cardew-Lowndes will write you a letter, which I shall dictate, asking you to return to her—the usual phrase is “to make a home for her”—and you will refuse. I propose that you should both give me your refusals now.

WILLIAM: [*Surprised.*] Before we've had the letter?

MR. RAHAM: Precisely. The letter which she will write, and which is read out in court, is so touching that on one occasion the husband, about to be divorced, was so moved that he immediately returned to his wife. She was very angry indeed, and so now I invariably get the refusal first.

WILLIAM: It's so difficult to write an answer to a letter that hasn't been written.

MR. RAHAM: To meet that difficulty I have also prepared the replies. Have you a fountain-pen?

WILLIAM: Yes.

MR. RAHAM: [*Taking a piece of paper from his pocket-book and two sheets of paper.*] If you will kindly write to my dictation, we will settle the matter at once. Here is a sheet of paper.

WILLIAM: [*Taking it.*] The address is—Hotel Majestic.

MR. RAHAM: You will see the point later. Here is a piece for you, Major.

[*He gives it to FREDERICK.*]

FREDERICK: Do we both write the same letter?

MR. RAHAM: Certainly not. I have two letters that I generally make use of, and I propose that you should each of you write one of them. The note of one is sorrow rather than anger. The other is somewhat vituperative. You can decide among yourselves which of you had better write which.

VICTORIA: They both habitually swore at me, but I think Bill's language was more varied.

MR. RAHAM: That settles it. Are you ready, Major Lowndes?

FREDERICK: [*Getting to ready write.*] Fire away.

MR. RAHAM: [*Dictating.*] My dear Victoria, I have given your letter anxious consideration. If I thought there was any hope of our making a greater success of married life in

the future than we have in the past I should be the first to suggest that we should make one more attempt.

WILLIAM: Very touching.

MR. RAHAM: [*Continuing.*] But I have regretfully come to the conclusion that to return to you would only be to cause a recurrence of the unhappy life from which I know that you have suffered no less than I. I am bound therefore definitely to refuse your request. I do not propose under any circumstances to return to you. Yours sincerely.—Now sign your full name.

VICTORIA: A very nice letter, Freddie. I shall always think pleasantly of you.

FREDERICK: I have my points.

MR. RAHAM: Now, Major Cardew, are you ready?

WILLIAM: Quite.

MR. RAHAM: My dear Victoria, I am in receipt of your letter asking me to return to you. Our life together has been a hell upon earth, and I have long realized that our marriage was a tragic mistake. You have sickened me with scenes and tortured me with jealousy. If you have tried to make me happy you have succeeded singularly ill. I trust that I shall never see you again, and nothing in the world will induce me ever to resume a life which I can only describe as a miserable degradation.

WILLIAM: Thick, eh?

MR. RAHAM: Now the crowning touch. Mark the irony of the polite ending: I beg to remain yours most sincerely. —Now sign your name.

WILLIAM: I've signed it.

MR. RAHAM: Then that is settled. Now we only have to go into court, apply for a decree for restitution of conjugal rights, and six months later bring an action for divorce.

VICTORIA: Six months later! But when shall I be free, then?

MR. RAHAM: In about a year.

VICTORIA: Oh, but that won't do at all. I must have my freedom by—well, before the racing season ends, at all events.

MR. RAHAM: As soon as that?

VICTORIA: The Derby, if possible. Certainly by the Two Thousand Guineas.

MR. RAHAM: [*Sbrugging his shoulders.*] In that case the only thing is cruelty.

VICTORIA: It can't be helped. They'll have to be cruel.

FREDERICK: I don't like the idea, Victoria.

VICTORIA: Try and be a little unselfish for once, darling.

WILLIAM: I could never strike a woman.

VICTORIA: If I don't mind I don't see why you should.

MR. RAHAM: Cruelty has its advantages. If it's properly witnessed it has a convincing air which desertion never has.

VICTORIA: My mother will swear to anything.

MR. RAHAM: Servants are better. The judges are often unduly suspicious of the mother-in-law's testimony. Of course, one has to be careful. Once, I remember, on my instructions the guilty husband hit the lady I was acting for in the jaw, which unfortunately knocked out her false teeth. The gentleman she had arranged to marry happened to be present and he was so startled that he took the night train for the Continent and has never been heard of since.

WILLIAM: I'm happy to say that Victoria's teeth are all her own.

MR. RAHAM: On another occasion I recommended a gentleman to take a stick and give his wife a few strokes with it. I don't know if he got excited or what, but he gave her a regular hiding.

VICTORIA: How awful!

MR. RAHAM: It was indeed, for she threw her arms round his neck, and, saying she adored him, refused to have anything more to do with the divorce. She was going to marry a colonel in the army, and he was most offensive to me about it. I had to tell him that if he didn't leave my office I would send for the police.

VICTORIA: You're dreadfully discouraging.

MR. RAHAM: Oh, I merely tell you that to show you what may happen. But I have devised my own system and have never known it fail. I always arrange for three definite acts of cruelty. First at the dinner-table. Now, please listen to me carefully, gentlemen, and follow my instructions to the letter. When you have tasted your soup you throw down the spoon with a clatter and say: Good Lord, this soup is uneatable. Can't you get a decent cook? You, madam, will answer: I do my best, darling. Upon which you, crying with a loud voice: Take that, you damned fool, throw the plate straight at her. With a little ingenuity the lady can dodge the plate, and the only damage is done to the table-cloth.

VICTORIA: I like that.

MR. RAHAM: The second act is a little more violent. I suppose you have a revolver.

WILLIAM: At all events, I can get one.

MR. RAHAM: Having carefully removed the cartridges, you ring the bell for the servant, and just as she opens the door, you point it at the lady and say: You lying devil, I'll kill you. Then you, madam, give a loud shriek, and cry to the maid: Oh, save me, save me.

VICTORIA: I shall love doing that. So dramatic.

MR. RAHAM: I think it's effective. When the servant tells her story in court it is very seldom that an audible thrill does not pass over the audience. They describe it in the papers as: Sensation.

VICTORIA: [*Practising.*] Oh, save me. Save me.

MR. RAHAM: Now we come to physical as opposed to moral cruelty. It's as well to have two witnesses to this. The gentleman takes the lady by the throat, at the same time hissing malevolently: I'll throttle you if I swing for it, by God. It's very important to leave a bruise so that the doctor, who should be sent for immediately, can swear to it.

VICTORIA: I don't like that part so much.

MR. RAHAM: Believe me, it's no more unpleasant than having a tooth stopped. Now if one of you gentlemen would just go up to the lady we'll practise that. I set great store on this particular point, and it's important that there should be no mistake. Major Cardew, would you mind obliging?

WILLIAM: Not at all.

VICTORIA: Be careful, Bill.

WILLIAM: Do I take her with both hands or only one?

MR. RAHAM: Only one.

[WILLIAM *seizes* VICTORIA *by the throat*.

MR. RAHAM: That's right. If he doesn't press hard enough kick him on the shins.

WILLIAM: If you do, Victoria, I swear I'll kick you back.

MR. RAHAM: That's the spirit. You can't make a bruise without a little violence. Now hiss.

VICTORIA: I'm choking.

MR. RAHAM: Hiss, hiss.

WILLIAM: I'll throttle you if I swing for it, by God.

MR. RAHAM: Splendid! A real artist. You're as good as divorced already.

VICTORIA: He did say it well, didn't he? It really made my blood turn cold.

FREDERICK: Do you want me to do it too?

MR. RAHAM: Now you've seen the idea I think it'll do if you just practise it once or twice with Major Cardew.

FREDERICK: Oh, all right.

MR. RAHAM: Now we come to a point trivial enough in itself, but essential in order to satisfy the requirements of our English law. Adultery.

WILLIAM: That I think you can safely leave to us.

MR. RAHAM: By no means. I think that would be most dangerous.

WILLIAM: Hang it all, man, human nature can surely be trusted there.

MR. RAHAM: We are not dealing with human nature, we are dealing with law.

WILLIAM: Law be blowed. With the price of a supper in my pocket and an engaging manner I am prepared to supply you with all the evidence you want.

MR. RAHAM: I am shocked and horrified by your suggestion. Do you expect a man in my position to connive at immorality.

WILLIAM: Immorality. Well, there must be—shall we say a *soupçon* of it—under the painful circumstances.

MR. RAHAM: Not at all. I always arrange this part of the proceedings with the most scrupulous regard to propriety. And before we go any further I should like to inform you that unless you are prepared to put out of your mind anything that is suggestive of indecent behaviour I shall decline to have anything more to do with the case.

VICTORIA: I think you must have a nasty mind, Bill.

WILLIAM: But, my dear Victoria, I only wanted to make things easy for you. I apologize. I put myself in your hands, Mr. Raham.

MR. RAHAM: Then please listen to me. I will engage a suite

of rooms for you at the Hotel Majestic. You will remember it was from there you wrote the letter in which you declined to return to your wife. The judge never fails to remark on the coincidence. On a date to be settled hereafter you will come to my office, where you will meet a lady.

WILLIAM: Do you mean to say you provide her too?

MR. RAHAM: Certainly.

FREDERICK: What's she like?

MR. RAHAM: A most respectable person. I have employed her in these cases for many years.

WILLIAM: It sounds as though she made a business of it.

MR. RAHAM: She does.

FREDERICK: What!

MR. RAHAM: Yes, she had the idea—a most ingenious one to my mind—that in these days of specialized professions there was great need for someone to undertake the duties of intervener. That is the name by which the lady is known adultery with whom is the motive for divorce. She has been employed by the best legal firms in London, and she has figured in practically all the fashionable divorces of the last fifteen years.

WILLIAM: You amaze me.

MR. RAHAM: I have felt it my duty to give her all the work I can on account of a paralyzed father, whom she supports entirely by her exertions.

VICTORIA: Not an unpleasant existence, I should imagine.

MR. RAHAM: If you knew her you would realize that no thought of that has ever entered her mind. A most unselfish, noble-minded woman.

WILLIAM: Does she make money by it?

MR. RAHAM: Sufficient for her simple needs. She only charges twenty guineas for her services.

WILLIAM: I'm sure I could get it done for less.

MR. RAHAM: Not by a woman of any refinement.

WILLIAM: Well, well, with most of us it's only once in a lifetime.

MR. RAHAM: I will proceed. You will fetch this lady at my office, and you will drive with her to the Hotel Majestic, where you will register as Major and Mrs. Cardew. You will be shown into the suite of rooms which I shall engage for you, and supper will be served in the sitting-room. You will partake of this, and you will drink champagne.

WILLIAM: I should like to choose the brand myself.

MR. RAHAM: [*Magnanimously.*] I have no objection to that.

WILLIAM: Thanks.

MR. RAHAM: Then you will play cards. Miss Montmorency is a wonderful card-player. She not only has an unparalleled knowledge of all games for two, but she can do a great number of tricks. In this way you will find the night pass without tediousness, and in the morning you will ring for breakfast.

FREDERICK: I'm not sure if I should have much appetite for it.

MR. RAHAM: I never mind my clients having brandy and soda instead. It looks well in the waiter's evidence. And after having paid your bill, you will take Miss Montmorency in a taxi-cab and deposit her at my office.

WILLIAM: It sounds a devil of a beano.

FREDERICK: I should like to see her first.

MR. RAHAM: That is perfectly easy. I know that ladies in these cases often like to see the intervener themselves. Ladies are sometimes very suspicious, and even though they're getting rid of their husbands, they don't want them to—well, run any risks; and so I took the liberty of bringing Miss Montmorency with me. She is waiting

in the taxi at the door, and if you like I will go and fetch her.

FREDERICK: A1. I'll go along and bring her down.

VICTORIA: Is she the sort of person I should like to meet, Mr. Raham?

MR. RAHAM: Oh, a perfect lady. She comes from one of the best families in Shropshire.

VICTORIA: Do fetch her, Freddie. Now I come to think of it, I should like to see her. Men are so weak, and I shall be easier in my mind if I can be sure that these poor boys won't be led astray.

[FREDERICK *goes out*.]

WILLIAM: Do you mean to say that with this evidence you will be able to get a divorce?

MR. RAHAM: Not a doubt of it. I've got hundreds.

WILLIAM: I am only a soldier, and I dare say you will not be surprised if I am mentally deficient.

MR. RAHAM: Not at all. Not at all.

WILLIAM: Why on earth does such a state of things exist?

MR. RAHAM: Ah, that is a question which at one time I often asked myself. I confess it seemed to me that when two married persons agreed to separate it was nobody's business but their own. I think if they announced their determination before a justice of the peace, and were given six months to think the matter over, so that they might be certain they knew their minds, the marriage might then be dissolved without further trouble. Many lies would never be told, much dirty linen would never be washed in public, and the sanctity of the marriage tie would be strengthened rather than lessened if the world were spared the spectacle of the sordid aspect the state which is called blessed too often wears. There would be a notable saving of time, money and decency. But at last I hit upon the explanation.

WILLIAM: What is it, then?

MR. RAHAM: If the law were always wise and reasonable it would be obeyed so easily that to obey the law would become an instinct. Now, it is not for the good of the community that the people should be too law-abiding. So our ancestors in the wisdom of their hearts devised certain laws which were vexatious or absurd, so that men should break them and therefore be led insensibly to break others.

WILLIAM: But why is it not for the good of the community that the people should be too law-abiding?

MR. RAHAM: My dear sir, how else would the lawyers earn their living?

WILLIAM: I had forgotten. I see your point.

MR. RAHAM: I hope I have convinced you.

WILLIAM: Completely.

[At this moment FREDERICK comes in. He is pale and dishevelled. He staggers into the room like a man who has been exposed to a tremendous shock.]

FREDERICK: *[Gasping.]* Brandy! Brandy!

WILLIAM: What's the matter?

FREDERICK: Brandy!

[He fills almost half a glass with brandy and tosses it off. A voice is heard outside the door.]

MISS MONTMORENCY: Is this the way?

MR. RAHAM: Come straight in, Miss Montmorency.

[She enters. She is a spinster of uncertain age. She might be fifty-five. She looks rather like a hard-boiled egg, but there is in her gestures a languid grace. She speaks with a slight drawl, pronouncing her words with refinement, and her manner is a mixture of affability and condescension. She might be a governess in a very good family in the suburbs. Her respectability is portentous.]

MISS MONTMORENCY: But this is the kitchen.

[WILLIAM takes a long look at her, then gets up and goes to the brandy. His hand shakes so violently that the neck of the bottle rattles against the glass. He takes a long drink.]

VICTORIA: I'm afraid it's the only room in the house that's habitable at the moment.

MISS MONTMORENCY: To the practised observer the signs of domestic infelicity jump to the eye, as the French say.

MR. RAHAM: Miss Montmorency—Mrs. Frederick Lowndes.

MISS MONTMORENCY: [*Graciously.*] I'm charmed to make your acquaintance. The injured wife, I presume?

VICTORIA: Er—yes.

MISS MONTMORENCY: So sad. So sad. I'm afraid the war is responsible for the rupture of many happy marriages. I'm booked up for weeks ahead. So sad. So sad.

VICTORIA: Do sit down, won't you.

MISS MONTMORENCY: Thank you. Do you mind if I get out my note-book? I like to get everything perfectly clear, and my memory isn't what it was.

VICTORIA: Of course.

MISS MONTMORENCY: And now, which of these gentlemen is the erring husband?

VICTORIA: Well, they both are.

MISS MONTMORENCY: Oh, really. And which are you going to marry after you've got your divorce.

VICTORIA: Neither.

MISS MONTMORENCY: This is a very peculiar case, Mr. Raham. When I saw these two gentlemen I naturally concluded that one of them was the husband Mrs. Frederick Lowndes was discarding and the other the husband she was acquiring. The eternal triangle, you know.

WILLIAM: In this case the triangle is four-sided.

MISS MONTMORENCY: Oh, how very peculiar.

MR. RAHAM: We see a lot of strange things in our business, Miss Montmorency.

MISS MONTMORENCY: To whom do you say it, as the French say.

VICTORIA: I don't want you to think that I've been at all light or careless, but the fact is, through no fault of my own, they're both my husbands.

MISS MONTMORENCY: [*Taking it as a matter of course.*] Oh, really. How very interesting. And which are you divorcing?

VICTORIA: I'm divorcing them both.

MISS MONTMORENCY: Oh, I see. Very sad. Very sad.

WILLIAM: We're taking as cheerful a view of it as we can.

MISS MONTMORENCY: Ah, yes, that's what I say to my clients. Courage. Courage.

FREDERICK: [*With a start.*] When?

VICTORIA: Be quiet, Freddie.

MISS MONTMORENCY: I think I ought to tell you at once that I shouldn't like to misconduct myself—I use the technical expression—with both these gentlemen.

MR. RAHAM: Oh, Miss Montmorency, a woman of your experience isn't going to strain at a gnat.

MISS MONTMORENCY: No, but I shouldn't like to swallow a camel.

MR. RAHAM: We shall be generous, Miss Montmorency.

MISS MONTMORENCY: I have to think of my self-respect. One gentleman is business, but two would be debauchery.

MR. RAHAM: Mrs. Lowndes is anxious to put this matter through as quickly as possible.

MISS MONTMORENCY: I dare say my friend Mrs. Onslow Jervis would oblige if I asked her as a personal favour.

VICTORIA: Are you sure she can be trusted?

MISS MONTMORENCY: Oh, she's a perfect lady and most respectable. She's the widow of a clergyman, and she has two sons in the army. They've done so well in the war.

MR. RAHAM: Unless we can get Miss Montmorency to reconsider her decision I'm afraid we shall have to put up with Mrs. Onslow Jervis.

MISS MONTMORENCY: I am adamant, Mr. Raham. Adamant.

FREDERICK: I'm all for Mrs. Onslow Jervis personally.

MISS MONTMORENCY: Then you fall to me, Major . . . I didn't catch your name.

WILLIAM: Cardew.

MISS MONTMORENCY: I hope you play cards.

WILLIAM: Sometimes.

MISS MONTMORENCY: I'm a great card-player. Piquet, écarté, cribbage, double dummy, baccarat, bezique, I don't mind what I play. It's such a relief to find a gentleman who's fond of cards.

WILLIAM: Otherwise I daresay the night seems rather long.

MISS MONTMORENCY: Oh, not to me, you know. I'm such a student of human nature. But my gentlemen begin to grow a little restless when I've talked to them for six or seven hours.

WILLIAM: I can hardly believe it.

MISS MONTMORENCY: One gentleman actually said he wanted to go to bed, but, of course, I told him that would never do.

VICTORIA: Forgive my asking—you know what men are—do they never attempt to take any liberties with you?

MISS MONTMORENCY: Oh no. If you're a lady you can always keep a man in his place. And Mr. Raham only takes the very best sort of divorces. The only unpleasantness I've ever had was with a gentleman sent to me by a firm of solicitors in a cathedral city. I took a dislike to him the

first moment I saw him, and when he refused to drink anything at supper but ginger-beer I was on my guard. A cold sensualist, I said to myself.

VICTORIA: Oh, I know so well what you mean.

MISS MONTMORENCY: He had no sooner finished his second bottle of ginger-beer than, without any warning at all, he said: I am going to kiss you. You could have heard a pin drop. I pretended to think he was joking, so I said: We have met for business rather than pleasure. And what d'you think he answered? He said: This is one of the rare occasions on which one can combine the two. I didn't lose my presence of mind. I expostulated with him. I told him I was a woman and defenceless, and he said: That's just it. Not a gentleman, of course, not in the best sense of the word. I appealed to his better nature. But all in vain. I didn't know what to do, when suddenly I had an inspiration. I rushed to the door and called in the detective who was watching us. He protected me.

MR. RAHAM: It was risky, Miss Montmorency. The judge might have said there was collusion.

MISS MONTMORENCY: Necessity knows no law, Mr. Raham, as those dreadful Germans say, and I was terribly frightened.

WILLIAM: I can assure you, Miss Montmorency, that you need have no fear that I shall take advantage of your delicate position.

MISS MONTMORENCY: Of course, you will divest yourself of none of your raiment.

WILLIAM: On the contrary, I propose to put on an extra suit of clothes.

MISS MONTMORENCY: Oh, Mr. Raham, please don't forget that I only drink Pommery. In the Twickenham divorce they sent up Pol Roger, and Pol Roger always gives me

indigestion. Fortunately the dear Marquis, who suffers from dyspepsia, had some pepsin tabloids with him or I don't know what I should have done.

MR. RAHAM: I'll make a note of it at once.

MISS MONTMORENCY: 1906. [To WILLIAM.] I'm sure we shall have a delightful night. I can see that we have much in common.

WILLIAM: It's too good of you to say so.

MISS MONTMORENCY: [To FREDERICK.] And I know you'll like Mrs. Onslow Jervis. A perfect lady. She has such charm of manner. So much ease. You can see that she did a lot of entertaining when her husband was Vicar of Clacton. They have a very nice class of people at Clacton.

FREDERICK: I shall be charmed to meet her.

MISS MONTMORENCY: You will take care not to be at all risqué, as the French say, in your conversation, won't you? Of course, she's a woman of the world, but as the widow of the Vicar of Clacton she feels it only due to herself to be a little particular.

FREDERICK: I promise you I'll be very careful.

MISS MONTMORENCY: I don't know what Mr. Raham would say to our sharing a suite. We could play bridge. She's a very fine bridge-player, and we only play threepence a hundred, because in her position she can hardly gamble, can she?

MR. RAHAM: I always like to oblige you, Miss Montmorency, but I hardly think that arrangement would do. You know how fussy the judges are. We might hit upon one of them who saw nothing in it.

MISS MONTMORENCY: I know. They're tiresome, silly creatures.

MR. RAHAM: Why, the other day I came across one who wouldn't believe the worst had happened when a man

and a woman, not related in any way, mind you, were proved to have been alone in a room together for three-quarters of an hour.

MISS MONTMORENCY: Oh, well, let us take no risks. Business is business. It must be you and me alone then, Major Cardew. You will let me know in good time when you fix the fatal night. I'm very much booked up just now.

MR. RAHAM: Of course, we will do everything to suit your convenience, Miss Montmorency. And now, Mrs. Lowndes, since we have settled everything, I think Miss Montmorency and I will go.

VICTORIA: I can't think of anything else.

MISS MONTMORENCY: Excuse my taking the liberty, Mrs. Frederick Lowndes, but after your great trouble is over should you be wanting any face massage, may I give you my card. ?

VICTORIA: Oh, do you do face massage?

MISS MONTMORENCY: Only for ladies who are personally recommended to me. Here is my card.

VICTORIA: [*Looking at it.*] Esmeralda.

MISS MONTMORENCY: Yes, it's a pretty name, isn't it? I also make the Esmeralda cream. The Marchioness of Twickenham's face was simply ravaged when she was divorcing the Marquis, and, believe me, after a course of twelve treatments you wouldn't have known her.

VICTORIA: Of course, all this sort of thing is a great nervous shock.

MISS MONTMORENCY: Oh, I know. And there's nothing like face massage for soothing the nerves.

VICTORIA: I'll certainly keep your card.

MISS MONTMORENCY: Good-bye, then. [*To WILLIAM.*] I'm not going to say good-bye to you, but au revoir.

WILLIAM: Believe me, I look forward to our next meeting.

MR. RAHAM: Good morning, Mrs. Lowndes. Good

morning. [*Moving towards the door that leads into the area.*]
Shall we go out this way?

MISS MONTMORENCY: [*Just a little taken aback.*] The area steps? Oh, very well. It's so quaint and old-fashioned. I always think a lady if she is a lady can do anything.

[*She gives a gracious bow and goes out, followed by*
MR. RAHAM.

WILLIAM: This is a bit of all right that you've let us in for, Victoria.

VICTORIA: Well, darling, it's the only thing I've ever asked you to do for me in all my life, so you needn't complain.

WILLIAM: I will bear it like a martyr.

VICTORIA: Now, the only thing left is for me to bid you good-bye.

FREDERICK: Already?

VICTORIA: You must understand that under the circumstances it wouldn't be quite nice for me to stay here. Besides, without servants, it's beastly uncomfortable.

WILLIAM: Won't you even stay to luncheon?

VICTORIA: I don't think I will, thanks. I think I shall get a better one at mother's.

FREDERICK: Oh, are you going there?

VICTORIA: Where else do you expect a woman to go in a crisis like this?

WILLIAM: I should think the steak was about done, Freddie.

FREDERICK: Oh, I'd give it another hour or two to make sure.

VICTORIA: Of course, I realize that it's a painful moment for both of you, but as you say, we shan't make it any easier by dragging it out.

WILLIAM: True.

VICTORIA: Good-bye, Bill. I forgive you everything, and I hope we shall always be good friends.

WILLIAM: Good-bye, Victoria. I hope this will not be by any means your last marriage.

VICTORIA: When everything is settled you must come and dine with us. I'm sure you'll find that Leicester has the best wines and cigars that money can buy.

[She turns to him an indifferent cheek.]

WILLIAM: *[Kissing it.]* Good-bye.

VICTORIA: And now, Freddie, it's your turn. Now that there's nothing more between us you might give me back that pin I gave you.

FREDERICK: *[Taking it out of his tie.]* Here you are.

VICTORIA: And there was a cigarette-case.

FREDERICK: *[Giving it her.]* Take it.

VICTORIA: They say jewellery has gone up tremendously in value since the war. I shall give Leicester a cigarette-case as a wedding present.

WILLIAM: You always do, Victoria.

VICTORIA: Men like it. Good-bye, Freddie dear. I shall always have a pleasant recollection of you.

[She turns the other cheek to him.]

FREDERICK: Good-bye, Victoria.

WILLIAM: Would you like a taxi?

VICTORIA: No, thanks. I think the exercise will do me good

[She goes out, and is seen tripping up the area steps.]

FREDERICK: A wonderful woman.

WILLIAM: I shall never regret having married her. Now let's have lunch.

FREDERICK: I wish I looked forward to it as much as you do.

WILLIAM: Dear old man, has this affecting scene taken away your appetite?

FREDERICK: It's not the appetite I'm doubtful about. It's the steak.

WILLIAM: Oh, don't you worry yourself about that. I'll just dish up. [*He goes over to the stove and tries to get the steak out of the frying-pan.*] Come out, you great fat devil. It won't come out.

FREDERICK: That's your trouble.

WILLIAM. [*Bringing the frying-pan to the table.*] Oh, well, we can eat it just as well out of the frying-pan. Shall I carve it?

FREDERICK: [*Sitting down.*] Please.

[*WILLIAM takes a knife and starts to cut the steak. It won't cut. He applies force. The steak resists stealthily. A little surprised, WILLIAM puts somewhat more strength into it. He makes no impression. He begins to grow vexed. He starts to struggle. He sets his teeth. It is all in vain. The sweat pours from his brow. FREDERICK watches him in gloomy silence. At last in a passion WILLIAM throws down the knife.*]

WILLIAM: [*Furiously.*] Why don't you say something, you fool?

FREDERICK: [*Gently.*] Shall I go and fetch my little hatchet?

WILLIAM: [*Attacking the steak again angrily with the knife.*] I know my theory's right. If you cook a pound of meat a quarter of an hour you must cook three pounds of meat three quarters of an hour.

[*A boy, carrying a large, square, covered basket, is seen coming down the area steps. He knocks at the door.*]

FREDERICK: Hulloo, who's this? [*He goes to the door and opens.*] What can I do for you, my son?

CLARENCE: Does Mrs. Frederick Lowndes live here?

FREDERICK: In a manner of speaking.

CLARENCE: [*Coming in.*] From the Ritz Hotel.

FREDERICK: What's that? Walk right in, my boy. Put it on the table.

WILLIAM: [*Looking at the label.*] With Mr. Leicester Paton's compliments.

FREDERICK: It's luncheon.

CLARENCE: I was told to give the basket to the lady personally.

FREDERICK: That's all right, my boy.

CLARENCE: If the lady's not here I'm to take it back again.

WILLIAM: [*Promptly.*] She's just coming downstairs. [*He goes to the door and calls.*] Victoria, my darling, that kind Mr. Leicester Paton has sent you a little light refreshment from the Ritz.

FREDERICK: There's half-a-crown for you, my lad. Now, you hop it quick.

CLARENCE: Thank you, sir.

[*He goes out.*]

FREDERICK: Now you can eat the steak if you like. I'm going to eat Victoria's luncheon.

WILLIAM: It's a damned unscrupulous thing to do. I'll join you.

[*They hurriedly begin to unpack the basket.*]

FREDERICK: [*Taking off a cover.*] What's here? Chicken *en casserole*?

WILLIAM: That's all right. Here, give me that bottle and see me open it.

[*He takes out a bottle of champagne and proceeds to open it.*]

FREDERICK: *Pâté de foie gras*. Good. Caviare? No. Smoked salmon. Stout fellow, Mr. Leicester Paton.

WILLIAM: Don't stand there staring at it. Get it out.

FREDERICK: This is a regular beano.

WILLIAM: I'm beginning to think the wangler won the war after all.

FREDERICK: *Mousse au jambon*. He's got some idea of Victoria's appetite.

WILLIAM: My dear fellow, love is always blind.

FREDERICK: Thank God for it, that's all I say. How's that cork going?

WILLIAM: Half a mo. It's just coming.

FREDERICK: This is what I call a nice little snack. Dear Victoria, she was a good sort.

WILLIAM: In her way.

FREDERICK: But give me *pâté de foie gras*.

WILLIAM: [*Getting the bottle opened.*] Pop. Hand over your glass.

FREDERICK: Here you are. I'm as hungry as a trooper.

WILLIAM: Before we start, I want you to drink a toast.

FREDERICK: I'll drink anything.

WILLIAM: [*Holding up his glass.*] Victoria's third husband.

FREDERICK: God help him!

WILLIAM: And for us—liberty.

[*As they drain their glasses the curtain falls quickly.*]

THE END

